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IN PLAIN AIR

BY

ELISABETH LYMAN CABOT

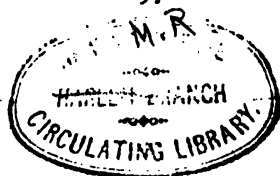


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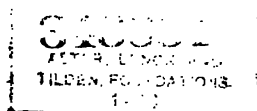
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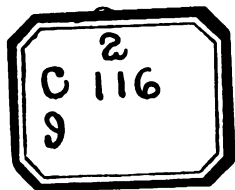


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IN PLAIN AIR

CHAPTER I.

IN one of our eastern cities there is a quarter known as the Hill, and about this hangs almost an old-world charm. Even fashion lingers regretfully on its quaint corners. One of the houses in this quarter has been the property of the Clayton family for nearly a century, but at the time of the opening of this story it was tenanted by one of the Claytons for the first time in twenty years.

Time had touched this house gently within and without, and Marion Clayton had made few changes in furniture or decoration when she supplemented them with her own possessions, gathered during ten years of travel in many lands.

Late one March afternoon the drawing room was occupied by a person as foreign to its quality as anyone intimate with Miss Clay-

ton could well be. Alice Dempster had come that morning from Brookfield, to shop and spend the night with her friend, but finding Marion from home, she had decorously hidden her bag, and drawing her chair near the window, was soon deep in a magazine article on "The Disadvantages of City Life." Reading, with Miss Dempster, was both an inherited and an acquired taste, and Miss Clayton, glancing up at the window on her way to the door, was less surprised at the occupation than at the presence of her friend. This gave her unalloyed pleasure. The two had been schoolmates, and that in itself is a spell to conjure with. And Alice came from Brookfield—but more of that hereafter.

Miss Dempster heard the click of the latch-key, and was in the hall before Marion had fairly opened the door. The two young women kissed each other cordially, and exchanged the inevitable commonplaces of a suspended intercourse. Then Miss Clayton made her way to the fire, shivering a little as she saw its languishing condition.

"Where are your country traditions, Alice, if you can't keep up an open fire? Mary"—to a maid who was crossing the hall—"make

a fresh fire, please, and bring tea; then take Miss Alice's bag upstairs; she will spend the night."

"Are you sure it is convenient?" Miss Dempster asked politely. But Marion only laughed.

"Did you really think I would let you go?" she asked. "Now do take off your hat and jacket, and make yourself cosy."

Alice complied with a light sigh. She had meant to stay over night, but she would have been better pleased if Marion had ignored the intention—had given her invitation in a more regular way. But regular ways, with Marion, were past praying for.

While Miss Dempster was in the hall, her hostess had laid aside her own wraps, and drawn two chairs to the fire. Seated in one of these, her face turned expectantly toward her friend, she became at once the genius of the charming little place.

Marion Clayton was not beautiful. Indeed her too slender form and the thinness of her face laid her open to the charge of being really plain; but grace and expression took the place of form and colour, and she held her admirers by a charm in which the physical

had its full share. Her physique was one, too, which was capable, in an unusual degree, of giving expression to her personality. This was not simple, and was free, enough from the vice of consistency, but in general was characterized by those tender, artistic, pleasure-loving traits which, springing up in the path of Puritanism, have vexed its soul from the earliest days until now.

Alice Dempster, on the other hand, might have come over in the Mayflower. She had, in perfection, the fragile New England prettiness, which her twenty-five years and intellectual habits had not done more than slightly fade. Her personality had amusing qualities which were all its own, and irritating ones, which Marion chose to refer to no source; but in her high standard of conduct, and the uncompromising loyalty to it which she exacted, alike from herself and others; in her exaltation of mind at the expense of matter, she seemed, to her friend, to be the personification of New Englandism, that part of the stream of tendency from which Americans draw so much of their strength. It was, perhaps, the knowledge, on Marion's part, that so little of her own was drawn from that head

- which pricked her admiration with a guilty spur. Certain it is that, though a wide experience of life had somewhat abridged for her the breadth of the stream, its depths had never yet been fathomed by her fancy.

It was in the natural course of the stirring of such sensations, which a fresh sight of Miss Dempster always aroused, that they should bring her to the question:

"And how is Brookfield? Tell me all about it."

Miss Dempster smiled. "Where shall I begin?"

"Oh, in the middle—with Aunt Susan Clapp."

Miss Dempster coughed uneasily.

"I went there last evening on my way to order the stage, and Aunt Susan gave me a message for you."

"Was it one of affection?" Marion asked dryly.

Miss Dempster's manner showed constraint.

"It was about your acquaintance with Walter Kincaid," she said. "She called it your 'goings on with him.'"

Here she paused, but as Marion did not speak, she continued:

"I told her I hardly thought you knew Mr. Kincaid, but she said it came pretty straight—through Mrs. Abijah King."

"Why, she lives in Colorado Springs!" exclaimed Marion.

"Oh, yes!" Miss Dempster said calmly, as one who knows the higher branches in the art of gossip.

"Well!" Marion said with a puzzled sigh.

"She wished to show me the letter," Alice said, "but it was in her pocket. I suppose you know that Aunt Susan's pockets are always in her petticoats."

"No, indeed! What for?"

"On her wedding tour Uncle Elias gave her twenty dollars to spend, and she carried it about till her pocket was picked. Ever since then she has put her pockets in her petticoats. She goes into the closet to feel in them, and she always blames uncle for the trouble. She says, 'It's just like a man to give you money and then take you where you'll lose it.'"

Miss Dempster had almost lost sight of her original purpose, but she recurred to it now.

"She made two trips, because she forgot to take out her spectacles; and then, after all, the piece of the letter that had the news about you was not there; Kitty Frazer had taken it home to read to Grandma Sloane."

"So you didn't find out what I had done, after all?"

"No, Aunt Susan did not seem to know herself, but she said: 'You'd better tell Marion she won't do Walter Kincaid any good in Brookfield, if that's what she's after.'"

Marion leaned back in her chair. The smile of amusement with which she had listened to Miss Dempster's characterization of Mrs. Clapp had already faded from her face. She was experiencing the slightly bitter after-taste of certain spicy draughts.

Marion Clayton held that there were occasions (but they were of a kind very unlikely to occur in the life of a quiet gentlewoman) when it became a duty to enter the lists against public opinion, but that usually it was better to give it a wide berth. In part, this conviction was temperamental, but in part it was based on a belief as well founded as that of the impossibility of restoring the bloom to a peach. She felt an amused annoy-

ance at the coupling of her name with that of Walter Kincaid.

Meanwhile, Miss Dempster had her own reflections. She had not been quite without guile in her choice of a subject with which to satisfy her friend's thirst for Brookfield items; but guile, with Miss Dempster, was merely rudimentary. In this case, it did not suggest anything beyond the introduction of a topic about which she wished to know more; and it was plain that this time she had defeated her own end. Whatever information Marion might have let fall about Mr. Kincaid could not be looked for now; yet she spoke of him as they went in to dinner, as the best way of ignoring the subject.

"I do not know what Aunt Susan calls 'carrying on,'" she said. "Mr. Kincaid has been here, and I have given him letters for his sister. I certainly never thought of doing him good in Brookfield, or anywhere else; I only wished to be pleasant."

Miss Clayton once said of herself that she was very loosely put together, but she never realized this so strongly as when she was in the presence of Miss Dempster's moral and mental compactness.

"There isn't room for so much as an entering wedge," she thought, as she saw Alice, after dinner, produce a neat work-bag and begin a piece of embroidery.

"How lazy you must think me, Alice!" she said after a few minutes.

"Oh, no!" replied Miss Dempster, with an evident desire not to be too hard on Marion's shortcomings. "I often wish that I could be idle with a good grace."

"I should like to think it was early education," persisted Miss Clayton. "But you know, Alice, we always hemmed our crash towels together."

"Aunt Letty Frazer says it is due to prenatal influences—mother was always such a driver," said Miss Dempster, fastening off a thread with precision.

"I should say they were prehistoric," said Marion. "Nothing short of the inheritance of ages could make anyone so perpetually and ardently busy."

"Oh, I do not know," Miss Dempster replied, with condescending playfulness. "Bad habits are easily acquired."

The drift of this bit of badinage had been, in Marion's mind, toward Brookfield, and

she was just about to speak of it again when the door-bell rang. At this sound, which in a city house attracts little attention, she felt unaccountably perturbed, and she was not surprised when Mary announced Mr. Kincaid, and that young man's person filled the doorway.

We say "filled" advisedly, for Walter Kincaid's figure would have been better suited to a battle-field than to Miss Clayton's little drawing room. His dark, curling hair, and the beard which followed the outline of his chin, gave him a slightly foreign look that seemed flatly contradicted by the shrewd and kindly Yankee expression of his face. He had the inevitable country air of wishing to make away with every part of his anatomy in turn, finally settling upon his hands as the most objectionable of the whole; as no doubt they are at such times, to persons who have been brought up to look upon them as intended merely for use.

Miss Clayton had a lively sense of the infelicity of his coming this particular evening, and of the inferences which Brookfield, in the person of Miss Dempster, would be likely to draw from it. Her instinctive admiration for

Alice and her inherited respect for Brookfield standards might, under different circumstances, have had other results; but the mettlesome humour which had been stirred into life by the hint of ill-natured gossip about her needed only a touch of the lash to break into a run, and Mr. Kincaid found himself unexpectedly advanced in her acquaintance since their last meeting. She gave him her hand, and Alice bowed ceremoniously at the mention of his name.

The weather had hardly been disposed of before Miss Clayton, with her eyes on a portfolio resting on Mr. Kincaid's knees, said smilingly, "I see you have something for me, there."

Walter Kincaid had the social sense—in embryo, and he knew that Miss Clayton meant the portfolio to follow the weather. In his wish to second her, he began, too hurriedly, to untie the ribbons.

"You'd better let me untie those," said his hostess; "I have a genius for knots." And then, to avoid the awkward pause which she felt sure Miss Dempster was doing all in human power to foreordain, she said:

"What did you choose, wall paper?"

"Yes, it's the easiest, and I guess it 'll pay as well as any. It all depends on whether that young lady has the knack of knowing just what's wanted next. Those manufacturers don't care anything about what's pretty; they just want to know whether it 'll sell."

The first awkwardness over, the young man had become indifferent to Miss Dempster's presence, and felt as much at his ease as Marion had meant that he should—enough so to look with open amusement at her efforts to untie the obstinate knot.

"I guess you'd better let me have it," he said at last. "You may have lots of genius, but you need a little practical training."

Marion glanced quickly at his hands. She had been taught to look for the cushioned finger tips which mark generations of manual dexterity, and she handed back the portfolio, smiling at her own expense.

"Who was your grandfather, Mr. Kincaid?" she asked.

"Master mechanic, and his father and his," replied the young man, with the quick seizure of her meaning for which, in society, Marion often longed in vain.

The portfolio was, by this time, spread out between them. It contained a pamphlet about wall-paper designing, some colour plates, and a number of specimens of wall paper. The whole was intended, by Marion, as a gift to a member of her "Working Girls' Club," and she wished to understand the subject, in order to talk with the girl about it. Walter Kincaid had familiarized himself with it, and spoke with the precision of a skilled workman in regard to details. But it was in his comments on the bits of paper that Marion felt most interested. In these he showed a warm feeling for colour and line, with a scepticism in regard to the selling qualities of beauty which seemed hard enough to be founded on fact.

It was some curiosity in regard to this foundation which prompted Marion to say, after the portfolio had been put aside:

"Have you always cared for Art?"

"Didn't know it if I had," said the young man with true Yankee sense of fun. "If you'd lived in Jones Place all your days, I guess you wouldn't have much to say about Art," he added more soberly. "All I know

is, I wanted things pretty, and hated 'em ugly ever since I can remember."

"That's an answer," Miss Clayton said, laughing. "I'm afraid you think me very personal, but the truth is I like things to be pretty, myself, and I have always been interested in knowing how I came to do so; it isn't a common New England trait."

"Guess you're about right there," said the young man. "Why, when I was a youngster, seems 's 'f I couldn't stand some of the things I'd see every day of my life."

"What things?" asked Marion.

"Well, mostly the way folks up our way had of fixing up their houses inside, but there were some pretty bad things outside, too. I guess you've heard of Mr. Dunlap, firm of 'Dunlap & Hughes'—he talked about building a Town Hall for Brookfield. He got a builder, a friend of my father's, to make the plans. I used to draw for him some, evenings, and I couldn't stand the things he stuck on it. He was going to use two colours of paint, of course; and you'd have laughed, if you hadn't cried, to see the way he was going to put 'em on. One day I was down to Northboro, and saw their Town

Hall; some city feller 't used to live there 'd given the plans. I just walked round and round it, and wished I knew how he'd done it. I came home and told Loomis about it and he was pretty huffy, well, maybe that wasn't any wonder, but everybody else seemed just as mad at the idea that anybody could do better than a Brookfield man, they didn't care who it was, or what he'd done."

During the last speech Miss Dempster sat with compressed lips. Her determination to have no part nor lot in the entertainment of Mr. Kincaid was struggling with a growing feeling that it was her duty to put down that young man's arrogant pretensions to a knowledge of Brookfield, and here she suddenly entered the conversation:

"I really must deprecate your manner of speaking of Brookfield, Mr Kincaid," she said, punctuating her speech with her usual exactness. "I do not of course pretend to know the sentiment in the north part of the town, but when you speak of Brookfield, I suppose you mean the representative opinion there, and I do not think there is anything in that to indicate that the town is ignorant of the best or indifferent to having it."

"Now, Miss Dempster, right there you and I'll have to differ. When you say 'representative' I guess you mean the big-bugs, Colonel Frazer and Judge Clapp, and those, but when I say 'representative,' I mean the majority, in town meeting or somewhere like it. You don't suppose I'm saying but what there are plenty of people in Brookfield who know a handsome thing when they see it, and would put it up in a minute for themselves, or the town for that matter, if it'd let 'em; but I do say that there aint a majority in any square mile of that town, unless it is down there on High Street where your folks live, but what would rather have anything that was built by a Brookfield man than allow that anybody outside could do better. Why, they wouldn't take plans from anyone—not if he was——"

"Richardson," suggested Marion.

"How?" said Kincaid, who had never heard of Richardson.

Marion did not answer, and Miss Dempster was too anxious to prove her point to notice this little interruption.

"I suppose, Mr. Kincaid, that it is the town meeting which has given us our con-

veniences, and I fancy it would be difficult to find a place of its size which has so many; and they were certainly not invented in Brookfield."

"Well, Miss Dempster, when you come to electric lights, and a fire alarm, and such things, I guess even Brookfield knows they can't be beat. If you could make 'em see that it was just as good to have pretty-lookin' buildings, and that those Brookfield builders couldn't plan 'em, I guess you'd see a change right away."

"You see, Alice, it's a case of 'We needs must love the highest when we see it,' " said Marion, who might be pardoned for smiling a little at her friend's discomfiture. "I must say," she added, "that Freeman's Block and the new Library speak for Mr. Kincaid's theory; and, now I think of it, didn't someone offer plans for the Library that were voted down?"

Miss Dempster appeared not to have heard this question, and she wisely refrained from defending those architectural mongrels. The best she could do was to say sententiously:

"There are bad buildings in every town, but if such a state of things existed in Brook-


field as one would infer from listening to Mr. Kincaid, it would hardly be the lovely place it is." Saying which, she rose to put the threads which she had been gathering into a neat little pile, into the fire.

Mr. Kincaid rose too, and began to make his way to the hall, in order, after the country fashion, to put on his overcoat before bidding his hostess good-night. He remarked as he did so:

"I guess you'd find it pretty hard to spoil Brookfield; you'd have to pull down all the old buildings to begin with, and then there'd be the river and the mountains. We do go ahead of Northboro there."

Miss Clayton was standing in the doorway, knowing that young Kincaid's exit would be only less painful than his entrance, and meaning to make it easier when the time should come. Miss Dempster, meanwhile, had resumed her chair and was looking over a magazine, reserving from it just enough attention to take note of Mr. Kincaid's leave-taking.

"I feel as if I had not thanked you enough for the portfolio," Marion said when the young man was ready to go. "It was very kind of you to take so much trouble; isn't there anything——"



"There isn't anything to pay, Miss Clayton," he said, looking a little troubled. "I know a party in the wall-paper business, and he was glad to give me those things."

"But the portfolio——" Miss Clayton said gently.

"Well, you can pay me for it if you want to; it was seventy-five cents, but I'd be real glad if you'd take it for that young lady."

To Marion this speech, crude as was its sound, held suggestions of the very essence of good breeding. She blamed herself for having tried to buy her freedom from an unwished-for debt at the price of the young man's pride, and said:

"Thank you, Mr. Kincaid, I will accept it for Sadie with pleasure;" and she added as she shook hands with him:

"I hope you will come to see me again."

Walter Kincaid glanced from her to the little drawing room, and back again. He did not care how nearly he approached the circumference of that circle which held such persons as Miss Clayton, and such things as her house, but he understood that, in those few words, she had marked his inclusion in it.

After the front door had closed, Marion returned to the parlour and found Alice with

her work neatly folded, ready to go upstairs, and the two betook themselves to the guest chamber.

Marion peeped into the pitcher, counted the towels, and, in general, satisfied herself that everything was provided for the comfort of her guest, and then, standing by the dressing table, she waited for a pause in her friend's methodical preparations for the night. It came at last, and she was about to offer a good-night kiss, when Alice said:

"Really, Marion, I hope you have sufficiently considered what you are doing in taking up that young man. You know he can never have any social position in Brookfield."

"That seems a poor reason why he should never have one anywhere else," said Marion with a tired smile. "No, really, Alice, I don't think I can consent to be bound by Brookfield standards in the matter, but if you will take me, sometime when I am not so abjectly tired, I promise you I'll *listen* to reason, if nothing more."

And with this Miss Dempster was forced to be content.

CHAPTER II.

It was an April day in Brookfield. After a week of rain came a burst of summer sunshine, and there sprang up a new world with the quickness and completeness of a juggler's trick. The sky seemed too blue, the grass too green, the songs of the birds too clear and musical, to be those of the world of a week before. Marion, standing in the library window of her Brookfield house, involuntarily shaded her eyes with her hand.

A train of circumstances, quite unforeseen on the day which Alice Dempster had spent with her in town, had ended in Marion taking up her abode in the old house; but the compelling motive had been her real wish for a taste of country life. As a girl she had loved Nature, but there must be a development of character beyond that of girlhood, to crown such love with appreciation. For this development, Marion had turned, instinctively, to city life, but of late she had felt a growing distaste for it.

"I am tired of the complexity of it," she had said to one of the friends who had tried to dissuade her from her course; and in fact she thought of Brookfield as a sort of pastoral checker-board on which one might advance to the king-row by easy steps and with a comfortable directness.

Although her decision was voluntary, it was indicative of a certain phase of Marion's character, and perhaps of the conditions from which she had wished to escape, that she should in some sort take credit to herself for it, and kill the fatted calf in her own honour on this return to the home of her fathers.

Old Squire Clayton had shown his good sense in the choice of a site for his house. High Street, which, very early in the history of Brookfield, had been taken possession of by the aristocracy of the town, was the usual broad, elm-shaded highway of a New England village. At its lower end once stood the tavern and the store, with the few other buildings which require a central location. Now, in their place, was a double row of business blocks, and, near by, the post office and Library. After these came the houses of the Dempsters and their kin, who, under the

names of Clapp, Frazer, Burnett, and others, made up the roll of the first Brookfield families. These houses were for the most part square and solid, with deep door-yards and old-fashioned gardens. Beyond them, High Street took a sharp turn, and skirting a little knoll, was lost in the aimless meanderings of a country road. On the left, just at its first rise, Squire Clayton had built his house, and the taste and originality which he had bequeathed to Marion were shown both in the house and its site. The latter was high enough to give one a glimpse of the river as it escaped from a deep cut and spread itself out over the lovely Brookfield meadows, beyond which stood the mountains, their shoulders rounded against the sky.

Marion had that warm-hearted sense of kinship with her ancestors which is characteristic of those families in which there has been felt for generations a just pride of descent, and she was now indulging herself in a fantastic wish that old Squire Clayton would appear to welcome her to his house. There was less absurdity in the thought, because in her childhood, which lay nearer to her than to many persons of half her years, her great-

grandfather had been invested in her mind with a fairy quality which gave him, in point of reality, a superiority to mere flesh and blood; and made him, at the same time, indifferent to their limitations. His small, spare figure, clad in the old-time costume which he had been the last to abandon, his bright black eyes, and hair tied in a queue, seemed to make him own cousin to Cinderella's godmother.

Just at this point in her reflections there came from the gravel walk in front of her house the sound of deliberate footsteps, accompanied by the tap of a cane, with which, according to her mother's account, Squire Clayton's approach had always been heralded. A moment's breathless suspense on her part, and the figure of the pedestrian appeared in the opening of the hedge which marked the entrance of the driveway, and then stopped for a minute to look out over the meadows.

To Marion's disappointed fancy, it seemed aggressively modern. Laughing at her momentary delusion, she turned from the window, and going over to her desk, opened it with a businesslike snap, and began at once to write some long-delayed letters.

Farther down the street, where the houses stood so close together as to reveal only those bits of nature which existed for the benefit of the Dempsters, the beauty of the day was to be felt rather than seen.

"There's a real spring feel in the air," was Mrs. Clapp's comment, as she came down to the sitting room after the after-dinner nap which it was one of the objects of her life to conceal.

"There's a real spring feel in my leg," replied her husband, rubbing that member softly, and wishing that he had put another stick on the fire before his wife had come within earshot.

"If you'd spring 'round a little, your leg would be all right," rejoined Mrs. Clapp.

"Guess it would *if* I did," said Uncle 'Lias. It was one of his perversities to delight in dressing up his wife's words in his own meanings—a species of masquerade especially distasteful to their author, and to which they lent themselves with impish willingness.

"There isn't a mite of need of anybody having rheumatism if they know how to prevent it," continued Mrs. Clapp, with the air of one in complete possession of the secret.

"Wish father and grandfather had known about that, and maybe they wouldn't have passed it over to me," responded the imperturbable Uncle 'Lias, reaching for his newspaper, and at the same time glancing apprehensively at his wife, who was standing by the window, and might be expected at any moment to open it. She moved away, however, and went to the table for her knitting, sitting down with it in a chair which was so placed that it commanded a full view of the street.

"There go the girls this minute!" she exclaimed, getting up again and going to the window.

"Which girls?" asked her husband; and he might be pardoned the question, for in a village the association by relationship of two unmarried women gives the same assurance of perennial youth as does domestic service.

"Kitty and Florry. Who did you s'pose?" retorted his wife, watching sharply their advance.

They were an oddly assorted pair.

Colonel Frazer had been the most high-bred member of the Dempster connection, and he had given his "points" to his daugh-

ter. Her figure was tall, with the effect which in animals is called clean-limbed; she held her shoulders well back, and on them sat lightly the little head, dark-haired after the manner of the Dempsters, and with their regular features, a little too large for the face. Kitty Frazer lacked that birdlike vivacity of face and figure which is characteristic of American girlhood, and she lacked, too, that mental facility whose extent is too often suggestive of thinness. Her real charm lay in a divine innocence of manner, and in an elevation of character which made every motion, grave or gay, spring upward from a root.

Mrs. Clapp gave little attention to Kitty. In her eyes, her companion was of far more importance; as a prospective visitor after a week of seclusion, she promised entertainment for which her aunt was grateful in advance.

The best description which can be given of Florry Burnett's mode of progression is to say that she flounced. It is not a queenly gait, and yet it had its origin in Miss Burnett's sense of sovereignty in Brookfield, over which she ruled by a sort of divine right, her mother and grandmother having been village

belles. There was nothing elusive about Florry Burnett's beauty. Her hair was of the most approved shade of golden brown, and curled about her face in a well-regulated manner; her large blue eyes contrasted sharply with the redness of her cheeks. "Florry's a fine girl, a very fine girl," Mr. Clapp was wont to say with suspicious alacrity whenever his wife seemed disposed to call his loyalty in question; and the phrase described her, though the word did not.

Mrs. Clapp watched the pair with some impatience as they came down the street with the listlessness induced by the spring weather, and when they came opposite the gate she rapped with her knitting needle on the pane, and beckoned to them to come in.

"I suppose we'd better stop a minute," said Florry, not unreluctantly.

"I suppose so," assented Kitty, with a somewhat regretful look at the sunny landscape. Both of them knew the length, in such cases, of a Brookfield minute.

Mrs. Clapp met them at the door.

"For my part, I don't see why we shouldn't sit outdoors," she said, taking a chair from the hall and bringing it to the porch.

"I don't mind," said Florry, "but I should think you were crazy to think of it, Auntie."

"Well, I am," conceded Mrs. Clapp, bringing out the chair, however. "But if anything happens to me, I shall just lay it to your uncle. He's got the sitting room hot as Tophet with that great fire of his, and he watches me so close I daresn't open a window."

"I suppose his rheumatism makes him feel cold," said Florry, to keep the ball rolling.

"Rheumatism!" said Mrs. Clapp, with a sort of snort. "I guess we'd all be bed-ridden if we sat in such a room as that. What's going on up your way?" she asked suddenly.

Long indulgence of a relentless curiosity had given to Mrs. Clapp's face an habitual expression of sharp suspicion, and the glance which she threw at Florry over her knitting might have disconcerted a person less familiar with its evolution.

"Oh! nothing much our way," replied Miss Burnett, moving the bait gently down the stream.

"Well?" said her aunt impatiently.

"I was over at the Forrests' yesterday.

Mamie said she saw the tally-ho go down I guess Gould Whetmore couldn't stand it any longer."

"You don't say! Who went?"

"Oh! Ed Flatbush and the Minots, and, of course, those boys. I told Mamie I thought it was a real shame in Gould Whetmore, I should think he might be satisfied with his own place in Brookfield; but she said he never liked to go anywhere alone, and she supposed he must take a few people to the bad with him, just for company. Mamie's the brightest girl!"

Mrs. Clapp gave a little sound of appreciation of this witticism, but her eyes had an abstracted twinkle.

"I suppose Don went," she said.

"Oh, yes, Don!" exclaimed Florry, giving her body an impatient twist. "I have no patience with Don. They came to me about the tennis club, and I said decidedly in my opinion he ought not to be asked to belong. He'd better find somewhere else to play."

Kitty had been leaning listlessly against a pillar, looking idly up the street, but the mention of the tally-ho party brought her sharply back to the present. Her eyes—large, dark,

and troubled—fastened themselves on her cousin's face, and at the end her attention seemed fairly to have projected itself out of her keeping; leaving behind an anxious, absorbed face, which whoever ran might read.


Mrs. Clapp availed herself copiously of this opportunity. The child's secret, left unguarded in her face, touched no chord in the heart of that hardened old newsmonger—and in calling Mrs. Clapp by this name we are in no wise impugning her goodness or even her kindness of heart.

The sensitiveness of the Dempsters, if they may be said to have possessed such a quality, had little resonance. To them a spade was a spade; they neither looked backward to its composition nor forward to its uses, and it is doubtful whether it had ever come home to any of them that "pity is akin to love." In addition to her family traits Mrs. Clapp had limitations of her own, and a lifetime of motive hunting had made her not too particular in regard to the place into which she led the search. That she looked into Kitty's unguarded eyes was small matter. In such a cause she would hardly have respected the secrets of the dead.

Florry's curiosity had a family resemblance to her aunt's, but she had on her side youth and a certain sort of good-nature, and there was more of the spirit of adventure and less of business purpose in her attempts to fathom local mysteries.

She had introduced the topic of the tally-ho purposely to engage Kitty's attention, but, having done so, she relented somewhat, and felt a good-natured wish to lead away from the subject. This could not be done at once, for Florry's mental processes lacked flexibility. She was somewhat heated, too, and sat fanning herself with a folded paper and looking about her, in all directions except that in which her cousin was sitting. But Kitty's soul had not been lightly stirred, and she still sat with absorbed eyes fastened on Florry's full, resolute lips.

In the meantime an unnoticed figure was making its way down the street. It was the same that had given Marion so much amused vexation a few minutes before. She had not seen the face, but Gould Whetmore's was one which dominated his whole person to an unusual degree. It was emphatically that of one who had eaten of the tree of knowledge



of good and evil—the face of a man of the world. Of late years a look of disgusted weariness had become habitual to it, yet it could be a charming face, in spite of the lurking cynicism in the corners of the rather sweet mouth and long kindly gray eyes. Mr. Whetmore wore a pointed beard, and, in lifting his hat, he showed a full head of brown hair, slightly thinned at the temples.

“Gracious! there’s Gould Whetmore!” exclaimed Mrs. Clapp, who was naturally the first to see him.

“Talk of the devil!” said Florry, with a laugh loud enough to reach twice the distance to the street.

Kitty dropped her eyes, and a slow, hot colour mounted into her face. She wished to look up and bow, and in fact, if “wishes were horses,” she would have been riding down the street beside Mr. Whetmore, for was he not Don’s friend—well, perhaps Don’s enemy, but at all events his companion?

Mr. Whetmore did not glance toward the porch, but being conscious of the presence of acquaintances, he saluted the fact with the usual weary politeness which he extended to everything Brookfieldian. He did not need

Florry's exclamation to assure him of the position he held in the social economy of a town in which he did not live from choice.

The little group was so absorbed in looking at this always interesting figure that it did not see Alice Dempster come out of the house and make her prettily precise way to the street. In Brookfield the pleasure of visiting one's relatives was exalted into a duty, and Alice had started out ahead of time to pay her daily call to her aunt, but she had delayed somewhat to avoid meeting Mr. Whetmore, and so made a hurried approach to the porch.

Mrs. Clapp at once transferred her attention to the newcomer. After asking politely for the health of her family, she continued with:

"How's Marion these days?" and she accompanied this question with a look that might have indicated that she suspected Alice of concealing her friend about her person. Miss Dempster never failed to be disconcerted by this look, and she replied in a somewhat confused manner that Marion had found it hard to get her house in order, and

felt too tired to go about much. "She thinks that by to-morrow she will begin to feel like seeing people," she concluded.

"Humph!" said Mrs. Clapp, changing needles. "Young Kincaid went by here last night. I s'pose she felt like seeing him."

Miss Dempster's uncompromising truthfulness was no doubt calculated to secure her salvation in the world to come, but it had the disadvantage of endangering her friends' in the present one. It would have been better if she had frankly admitted that she knew of Walter Kincaid's reception, for her silence seemed to involve Marion in its guilt.

"I guess Marion Clayton 'll find she can't bring this town round to her way of thinking!" said Mrs. Clapp, finishing off a row, and beginning to count.

"I don't think Marion has any idea of making other people think as she does; she is far too independent herself for that," Alice said, with her ineffective primness.

"Sho!" said Mrs. Clapp.

During this conversation Uncle 'Lias had come out to the door, and, with his hands behind him, stood looking at his wife and

nieces, his eyes dancing, and his mouth puckered into a knot which moved from side to side.

Whatever aspirations Mr. Clapp might at one time have entertained toward making his own life the objective point in the universe had been effectually checked by his union with his wife. After this he had retired, like an unsuccessful actor, from the stage to the pit, where he had remained ever since, in amused contemplation of the rest of the company. The melodrama of Brookfield life, in which his wife had played every part from supe to leading lady, was to him the most delightful of comedies, in which he occasionally allowed himself the part of chorus. It was in this character that he had appeared on the porch.

"That was the way with the old Squire," he said, addressing himself to them all. "They used to say that, when he built that house, folks thought he was about crazy to put it away out there—it was all cow pasture beyond Robert Burnett's then. They said there'd be big snow storms, and no one would be able to break him out, and there was no end of joking about his farm being on a side-

hill. He paid no attention, and the winter after he built they made that the turnpike to Northboro—stages went twice a week. The Squire made a road down into the meadows, and you never did see such a farm as he had. He never talked to anyone else about building up there; it wasn't his way. By all accounts Marion's a chip of the old block. You'd better let her alone, Susan, about that young man; she won't make you have him here."

"You needn't tell me that, Mr. Clapp," said Aunt Susan.

"What does Miss Clayton look like?" said Kitty, who had a good deal of curiosity in regard to Marion, which the talk had not been of a kind to satisfy.

"Homely as a hedge fence," replied Mrs. Clapp promptly.

"Why, Aunt Susan!" exclaimed Alice.

Uncle 'Lias whistled softly, and looked with quizzical eyes at the chimney of the opposite house.

"Well, Elias Clapp, you can't say she's pretty-looking," said his wife, as if he had spoken.

"Well, no, I can't," admitted her husband,

but it is doubtful if he meant by this just what Mrs. Clapp did.

"But what does she look like, Uncle?" persisted Kitty. "Of course I used to see her when I was a little girl, but I don't remember her very well."

"That was pretty long ago, but don't you remember what you thought then?" said her uncle, smiling.

"Oh, I thought she was the loveliest looking person I ever saw, but I can't remember a thing about her face."

"I guess that's just about it," said Uncle 'Lias retreating hastily to the sitting room, just in time to escape his wife's contemptuous "Sho!"

CHAPTER III.

ONE day, about three weeks after Marion's coming to Brookfield, she sat in her library waiting for Alice, who was to call for her on her way to one of the typical Brookfield festivities which Marion called "sectarian frivolities." This was to be a combined fair and supper, given by the ladies of one of the churches. It was a somewhat momentous occasion to Miss Clayton,—a sort of personal presentation to Brookfield society,—and she had, in its honour, donned her spring costume, a harmony in soft grays.

As soon as Alice arrived, the two young women left the house, and walked rapidly down High Street to the Town Hall. Marion had early associations with the building, but she had not seen its interior for fully ten years, and as she entered through the heavy swinging doors she suffered a double pang at its dreary hideousness and the loss of her childish illusions in regard to it.

On the platform at the upper end were set a

number of tables, at which supper was being served, and at intervals along the walls were booths, at which was displayed the result of Brookfield industry. Rebecca at the Well, in the costume of an Italian peasant, dispensed lemonade at five cents a glass, and a dozen little girls, presumably in the guise of fairies, roamed about, selling bunches of discouraged-looking flowers. Marion was not disposed to be critical. Her social ideal was one which precluded mere fastidiousness, and she knew that a soul must form for itself a body suited to the world it lives in. Yet she hardly made use of this knowledge. Indeed, she looked upon everything in Brookfield as the future spirit of a man might have looked upon original chaos.

The first person whom she saw was Mrs. Clapp, seated at one of the supper tables, facing the body of the hall, that she might not miss any intellectual tid-bit while satisfying the wants of the inner woman. She beckoned Marion and Alice to a seat beside her, and they were soon helping on the cause by eating one of the best of suppers.

After it, Marion went to the body of the hall and visited the booths. To drink a glass

of lemonade and buy candy and flowers were simple matters, but she stood a long time before the "fancy table." She had just bought a piece of exquisite hand-sewing, and was about to turn away, when her eye fell upon a really clever little oil sketch leaning against a pile of checked aprons. Miss Clayton held the little canvas in her hand, waiting patiently to catch the eye of the young saleswoman, when she saw, at her elbow, a tall, pleasant-looking lady, who looked at her as if she wished to speak.

"I think this must be Miss Crosby," she said, and as the lady smiled assent: "I suppose this is by one of your pupils."

"Yes," said Miss Crosby, "it is Velma Kincaid's."

"Oh!" said Marion, recurring with pleasure to the sketch.

Miss Crosby watched her with civil intentness. She was not a native of Brookfield, but it was hardly possible to live there without contracting the prevailing complaint, and the allusions which she had heard to Marion's acquaintance with Walter Kincaid would have stimulated even untrained curiosity.

Marion bought the sketch, and then, turning to her companion, said:

"I wish you would tell me about the girl: I am very much interested."

"You know something of the family," suggested Miss Crosby.

"Very little," answered Marion. "I know the brother slightly; I happened upon him in Milner's one day, and he helped me very kindly about something I was trying to find, and afterward he came to my house. He interested me very much in his sister—and in himself," she added.

Like most persons who are in positions of authority, Miss Crosby had somewhat lost sight of her liability to err, but, as she looked in Marion's face, she was conscious of that shamefaced feeling which we sometimes have in the presence of a child. It was expressed in the tone and manner, as well as in the words of her rejoinder:

"I am sure your interest is not misplaced. Brookfield is singularly blind in regard to those young people."

"There seems to be a strong feeling about them; I had no idea that Brookfield social lines were so sharply drawn. Of course Mr.

Kincaid is crude, but when you come to that——” Marion’s eyes wandered thoughtfully about the hall, resting on one or two of the principal figures.

Miss Crosby gave her pleasant, well-considered smile.

“The father and mother were in the Mill, and I believe that constitutes a social barrier. The mother is a Frenchwoman; perhaps that is an added disadvantage.”

Her attention had wandered a little, and as Marion followed the direction of her eyes, she saw that Florry Burnett was making her way toward them from across the hall. She wore a hot-looking red dress, which intensified her high colour and the warm brown of her hair. She nodded to Miss Crosby and smiled with marked graciousness at Marion. She feared no rivalry on her own ground, but during the evening she had seen that Miss Clayton, by virtue of her foreignness, might become a pretender to the throne. For the present, however, she accorded her the consideration which was given by the Roman Emperors to those adversaries who, as captives, would figure to best advantage in their triumphs.

Marion looked at Florry with some inter-

est. She had given more attention to the career of that young person than perhaps it quite deserved, but in her idealized Brookfield such a character had little place, and attracted attention as an abnormality, while in reality it was merely a healthy secretion of Brookfield life. As the result of her study, she had decided that Florry had a heart, a point upon which she had at one time been in doubt. Anyone could see that she had a head; its workings were obvious to all, since it never concerned itself in any but the plainest way with any matter. Her morality was of the same order. In her world vice was vice, and virtue virtue, and there was never any uncomfortable doubt about the identity of the sheep and the goats. In short, in the spiritual world she had that happy confidence that she saw and heard the eternal verities which many persons enjoy in regard to temporal ones when roaming, uninstructed, through the realms of literature and art.

Marion, on the other hand, was always spiritually veiled, yet with a texture so diaphanous that its effect was less concealment than disguise. It was a fashion imper-

fectly understood by her intimates, perhaps because so few of us have any real modesty of soul; and Florry openly resented it.

"Well," she said after a minute, "I suppose you call this pretty countrified?"

"I call it very jolly, if that's what you mean; but I don't call it citified, or what am I here for?"

"I guess I know what you think pretty well," said Florry, laughing, "but strangers must take us as they find us."

"But Miss Clayton isn't a stranger," said Miss Crosby, giving her hand for good-night.


"She isn't a native," said Florry stoutly.

"We're none of us Indians, if you come to that," said Marion, laughing as they moved away.

After they were gone, she stood undecided for a moment, and then sat down again on the bench. Like many persons of fine nervous organization, she had limited powers of endurance, with a tendency to overestimate them, and she now realized that she ought to have felt thoroughly tired half an hour before. From the shelter of the fancy booth she looked furtively about the hall for Alice,

or someone else with whom she might start on her homeward walk. She soon espied Miss Dempster quite across the hall, making social overtures to an uncomfortable little boy—presumably a Sunday-school scholar—who wriggled ungratefully under the process, and looked about guiltily for a chance to escape. Marion's sense of humour was always the last to die, and she smiled appreciatively at the picture, her sense of its value giving her enough of a feeling of disloyalty to Alice to make her look away after a minute or two. Her eyes made a quick circuit of the hall, now nearly empty, except for the young fry, and came back to the table where the girls were putting away the unsold articles.

Leaning against one of the posts which supported the canopy stood Kitty Frazer. Marion saw her own feeling of weariness reflected in the face of the young girl, but weariness of something more than the moment, and so at variance with its wholesome youthfulness as to be almost tragic. The fine lines of her figure showed through the badly cut dress, whose soft tint harmonized with her rather sombre prettiness. Marion would have been at a loss to say why



she connected the girl's sad abstraction with a little scene which was going forward on the other side of the table. A group of three girls, with arms entwined ostentatiously about each other, swayed back and forth, laughing and talking with the affectation of indifference to being in a public place which is so much lower than the real indifference, certainly low enough. Two of them were mere examples of silly prettiness, but the middle one was a tall, high-coloured girl, with such an absence of youthful freshness as to suggest the idea that she had been a bold baby.

The object of their theatrical performance was, evidently, a cluster of young men standing at the opposite side of the hall. It was composed, for the most part, of the half-grown boys who had been contributing to the success of the evening, but in its centre stood a new arrival, striking enough to challenge Marion's jaded attention. He was a tall, spirited-looking young fellow, with a face which we may call, for want of a better phrase, of a distinguished type. In looking at it, Marion's mind reverted to portraits of young geniuses, in a feeble effort to fix a re-

semblance which in reality did not exist. The young man was dressed in corduroys, and held a riding whip in his hand. Behind him, at one of the tables, stood a stout, well-dressed woman, with the same faint flavour of celebrity in her handsome face. Marion thought she urged him, from time to time, to go, but though he listened to her with pleasant deference, he lingered, looking about the hall with a moody expression quite at variance with his bold carriage.

"Who is that good-looking boy?" said Marion to Kitty, who had come over to the bench and was kneeling in front of it, tying up some parcels.

She did not answer for a minute, and Miss Clayton, turning toward her to see if she had heard the question, saw that her hands were trembling and that her cheeks were wet with tears.

It flashed across Marion that she had in some way been guilty of clumsiness; in her code, one of the worst sins not deadly.

Seeing Kitty feeling rather helplessly in her pocket, she pushed a bit of embroidered daintiness into her hand, saying only:

"I'm so sorry."

The girl dried her eyes and looked around bravely.

"It's no matter. It's Donald Keith;" with unintentional relevancy.

"I think it's odd I've never heard anyone mention him," ventured Marion, in the hope of putting Kitty at her ease.

"They don't like him, here," said the girl stiffly.

"I'm surprised at that," rejoined Marion, feeling her way with more confidence. "He seems like such a fine, high-spirited fellow."

"They don't think he behaves himself."

Marion laughed softly, "He can't be a very hardened sinner;" and to the question in Kitty's eyes—"He isn't old enough."

The girl rose, and began mechanically to brush the dust from her dress. She looked at Marion with an expression at once relieved and disappointed, and Miss Clayton, feeling a little out of her depth, was relieved to see Alice coming to take her away. She kissed the young girl with a warm "good-night," and passed out of the hall, going, as she did so, very close to the group of young men. They had been joined by the girls whose antics had so offended her a few moments

before. The tall one was engaged in fastening a flower into the coat of the handsome boy, and he had evidently deprecated the attention, for, as Marion passed, she caught the words:

“ Oh, I guess you’ll like it, now it’s in.”

CHAPTER IV.

SINCE the evening when Marion had made it clear to Walter Kincaid that he might come to her house without a pretext, he had exercised great self-denial about doing so. This had not, however, resulted in his staying away for any length of time; and an evening in May, about six weeks after Miss Clayton had taken up her residence in the town, saw him on his way to pay her his third Brookfield visit.

For several minutes after the maid had announced his name and retired, Marion stood, undecided, by her dressing table. On it was lying a dainty work-bag, overflowing with disordered prettiness, and she felt a strong inclination to take it down with her. The day had been a chilly one, and the prospect of an evening in which an open fire, pleasant work, and the companionship of her rustic admirer should combine to create an atmosphere of restful brightness was almost

irresistible to our pleasure-loving heroine. In fact, it was the sense of its irresistibleness which made her pause. Marion was fond of animals, especially the large, tranquil kind. They rested her, and she felt that, in their brute way, they penetrated to the simplicity, the genuine fragment of nature which underlay her complexities, and which was the one thing in her rather various make-up which her human friends most often failed to understand. One of the latter, who had been peculiarly unsuccessful in this direction, but had had the well-nigh redeeming trait of recognizing his failure, and the wholly redeeming fate of dying while it was still fresh, had given Marion, as a parting gift, a noble mastiff. In the note in which he had begged her acceptance of his legacy, he had said:

“It pleases me to think that, while loving you devotedly, he can never wander, disheartened, through the mazes of your character.”

Marion had often thought of this, when she had taken refuge in the society of Bran.

He was dead now, and his mistress had never had the heart to replace him, but she knew that the comfort of his companionship

had been, in great measure, supplied to her since her acquaintance with Walter Kincaid.

Yet, in spite of her reflections, she took with her the work-bag; quieting her conscience with a resolution not to make use of its contents except under certain conditions.

Walter Kincaid had, meantime, been occupying himself with a study of the library. It was here that he had been received before, but at that time Marion had not so successfully thrown the charm of her own personality over the stiffness of the room which was to be her favourite—her “living room,” as they say in the country. Her first act had been to lay bare the old oak floor. Over this she had scattered antique rugs, which gave that hint of beauty in abeyance which is all we tolerate in a library. The book-cases were part of the wall, and covered all its space except, under the low ceiling, a narrow strip, which glowed with one of the soft Eastern colours. Against this stood out quaint vases and curious ornaments, which had been collected by Marion’s great-uncle in a lifetime of seafaring. Over the mantel

hung the only picture—one of Guercino's Sibyls. The room had responded to Marion's sympathetic touch, and the unobtrusive suggestions of modern life which had crept into it since her coming only served to bring the old appointments into more cordial relations with each other.

It had been one of the results of her acquaintance with Walter Kincaid that he had a more intelligent perception of beauty, and he took pleasure in walking around the room and noting the grounds of his admiration of it. As yet, his capacity for self-analysis had not advanced beyond the artistic point, and he was hardly prepared for the feeling of depression which followed his first sentiment of delight. Marion found him leaning against the mantel and looking down into the fire with an abstracted face. As she came forward to greet him he started from his absorption, and, for a moment, the thought of which he himself was hardly conscious looked at her from his eyes; then quickly faded, leaving only the deprecating friendliness which was the natural development of his modestly confident admiration.

Marion had seen the look before, but never

in the face of Bran, and she laid down the work-bag almost as she shook hands with her guest.

After this ceremony she turned to her desk, and from one of its drawers took the little sketch which she had bought at the fair. Her visitor's eyes brightened as they fell on it, and she placed it in his hands, waiting silently for him to speak.

He did not do so for a minute, and then said only:

"I guess Velma must have done that since she went to New York."

"I bought it at the fair," responded Marion. "I thought it showed real talent."

"Guess you're right," said the young man, looking at it thoughtfully.

Marion drew a chair toward the fire, and motioned to her visitor to be seated.

"Of course she will make great improvement in her execution," she said, "but her colour and composition show that she has ability. Doesn't she say that her masters speak well of her?"

"Yes, that big one says she'll get her into the life class in another year if she keeps on.

"I hope she hasn't any idea of giving it up!" exclaimed Marion.

"Oh, she'll keep on fast enough if father 'll let her."

"He doesn't approve of it, then?"

"He thinks it's pretty much all nonsense, and he likes to see Velma 'round."

"I suppose your mother sympathizes in your tastes," said Marion.

"Oh, Mother!" exclaimed the young man. "I don't know what we'd do without her." And during a second's pause he looked as men do when they salute the Flag.

Marion watched him with hungry appreciation of his feeling. Her love for her own mother had been the strongest emotion she had known, and, though it was five years since her death, her daughter could at times feel freshly orphaned. Now she sighed deeply, and Walter Kincaid's presence mingled with the atmosphere of the room and was as unnoticed as the soft hiss of the fire or the subdued radiance of the lamps.

Coming out of her brief reverie, Marion saw her companion looking at her with a face in which solicitude for her feeling and regret for his part in arousing it combined to pro-

duce an expression of real distress; and her quick sympathy took shame to itself for the open expression of a grief which was so often stirred as to take small account of causes. She was touched, too, by the comprehension and its resultant sympathy, and she offered the highest honour in her gift by responding to it with sweetly simple directness.

"You see how well I understand your feeling, and you must not regret having spoken so; it gives me more pleasure than pain."

"Miss Clayton!"

Marion's pulses gave a quick beat, for the tone showed strength of feeling hardly warranted by the occasion. In a moment he had subdued it, and said only:

"I'd a good deal rather you'd tell me, if I'm clumsy."

Marion shook her head lightly.

"You're not clumsy, and I can tell you that; there are some things no one can be expected to avoid. The rest is a matter of practice," she added, answering what he meant rather than what he said.

His reply did not come easily, though Marion rightly guessed that he would like to make one; so, after a slight pause, she said:

"I had a little talk with Miss Crosby about your sister; she evidently takes a great interest in her success."

Kincaid's face brightened.

"I guess if it hadn't been for Miss Crosby, Velma'd had to have given up. Did she tell you how that was?"

Marion shook her head.

"It's a pretty long story, and I don't know as I know all of it myself. Miss Clayton——"

"What is it?" said Marion, her hand stealing toward the work-bag.

"Don't you think I talk too much about myself?"

"I don't know," said Marion, smiling, "you're talking about your sister now," and then, as he did not look quite satisfied, she added seriously: "Mr. Kincaid, do you really think I would encourage you in something I should think the worse of you for doing?"

"Well, not unless you thought I couldn't be anyways satisfied without; I guess you like to make folks pretty comfortable."

"It is one of my weaknesses, but I promise never to indulge it at your expense. Now

please go on; I have a number of reasons for being very much interested in what you were saying."

"Grandfather Kincaid was a farmer, and I guess that's about as good as you can do around here," began the young man.

"It's a patent of nobility anywhere in New England," said Marion.

"Well, I don't know about that," said Walter, meaning that he did not quite follow her, "but anyway it's respectable. He left father the farm—and the mortgage" (with a flash of fun), "but what with bad years and the interest, he got pretty discouraged. Then Mr. Curtis came along—he's the one that owns the Morris mill—and he offered father big pay if he'd work for him. Father sort of hated to—guess he felt as if it was a step down; but Curtis kept at him, and about that time he saw mother, and I guess that finished it up."

By this time Marion was working comfortably; she looked up to ask:

"Didn't Miss Crosby tell me your mother was a Frenchwoman?"

"Her father's a French Canadian; but we aint any of us Catholics," said the young

man quickly, with instinctive Puritan, perhaps Anglo-Saxon, feeling that allegiance to that grand hierarchy implies loss of caste.

“When we were children we used to go to the Congregational Church, same as grand-father’s folks had—sat in the same pew—and they were always at mother to let Velma and me take part in the entertainments. Velma was a little beauty—she is now—and you couldn’t put her in anything but what she’d look nice——”

Marion threw a mischievously bright glance over her embroidery. Her confidence in Mr. Kincaid told her that he would not misconstrue such a look, however he might misapply it; and in the presence of wounds or even bruises Marion could no more forbear the use of any oil and wine of which she stood possessed than could the good Samaritan himself. The young man flushed, but not uncomfortably, and went on:

“Father used to grumble a good deal; he didn’t much relish their making such a show of Velma; but mother’d kind o’ smooth him down. She was real proud of us. I guess she thought we’d get in with a nice lot, and perhaps they wouldn’t care about father’s

being in the mill. Velma got along pretty well 'til she went to the High School, and then the girls sort of drew away from her. They'd be nice enough in school, but they didn't have much to say when they'd meet her in the street, and she never got asked to their parties and things. I didn't take much notice: boys aint the same as girls anyway; and I wouldn't have gone to a party then if you'd paid me for it. But by and by Velma began to say little things that made me think. They got up a tennis club down to the Centre, and all the girls in Velma's Sunday-school class joined except her. One day I asked her why, and she said: 'Oh, I guess we aren't good enough for them down there,' and began to walk off. 'Look here, Velma,' said I, 'I want to know what you mean; you were good enough the other night at the Old Folks' concert down to the church?' 'Oh, well,' said she, 'that was different,' and she began to cry. I couldn't stand that, and I made her tell me all about it. Come to find out, she'd never been asked to one of their houses since she was a little girl. She said she didn't care much, anyway, though I knew that was a whopper, but she did want to be

in Miss Crosby's painting class; mother'd promised her the money, but she didn't believe the girls would like to have her. I told her if they didn't I'd know the reason why, but she said she'd die before she'd ask to belong. I just marched right off to Miss Crosby; she used to be my Sunday-school teacher. I told her the whole thing, and she sent for Velma to bring her drawings,—the ones she'd done at school,—and the upshot of it was she told Velma she'd rather have her than all the rest of the class put together. I don't know just how they fixed it up, but I guess Miss Crosby's pretty set when she sets out to be, and she told Velma that it wouldn't be right to give up cultivating her talent just because is was disagreeable. The girls are nice enough to her; it wasn't their fault, anyway."

"Whose was it if it wasn't theirs?" asked Marion, with some heat and with a latent wish to fasten upon the younger generation a fault which she preferred not to believe possible to an older one.

"Oh, I don't know! It's kind of the way things go," said the young man with unconscious astuteness.

Marion was silent for a minute, and then said:

"Have you ever thought that Miss Burnett had anything to do with the standards of the town?"

"They all think pretty much the way she acts, but I don't know which comes first. Florry Burnett's got a pile of assurance, and when she knows a thing she knows it. If it's that anybody thinks too well of themselves, she'd just as liv' tell 'em so as not. Come to think of it, don't know but she thinks it's her duty."

Marion laughed rather joylessly.

"If your sister is successful, I suppose they'll forget all about their opposition to her socially?"

"Don't know about that," said Kincaid. "Seems as if the more talent she had the less they liked it. Anyhow, I'm glad she's out of it."

"I'm afraid you have to take it in her stead," said Marion, smiling at him in a way to make Brookfield censure bearable.

"Oh! I guess my back's broad enough," said the young man, as he rose to go. Coming back from the hall with his hat in his

hand, he found Marion still looking reflectively into the fire. It needed all the comfort to be derived from the time-worn adage, that "exceptions prove the rule," to carry off the first chill of disappointment in the Brookfield of her fancy. She looked up at the young man's stalwart form and intelligent face, and gave a little sigh over the obtuseness which could fail to recognize such good material; while in her heart there lurked a suspicion, which as yet her consciousness ignored, of something which was not obtuseness, and which refused to make use of the material on the very ground of its goodness.

"Don't you worry!" said the object of her solicitude. "I guess we shall get along. Brookfield aint all the world. I wouldn't have told you, only I kind of wanted you should know just how much you'd done for me. That time you asked me to your house——" He broke off abruptly, and after a minute began again in a fresh place:

"Miss Clayton, don't you let them worry you about me; don't you! I'd rather never come here again. I know just what they can do to make you uncomfortable, and if anybody sticks a pin into you, you may not care

for the person and you may not care for the pin, but it hurts. Now don't it?"

Marion was delicately truthful, and even in acquaintanceship the use of social insincerities was repugnant to her. She saw, too, that Mr. Kincaid had a real wish, which sprang from no vulgar curiosity, to know whether, and to what extent, she had been made to suffer annoyance in behalf of her impulse to befriend him. It was not the first time that she had been called upon to render a wondering homage to the good breeding which continually triumphed over Walter Kincaid's lack of cultivation, and which, on this occasion, made him as unwilling to ask the question as he was to have it left unanswered. It was her instinct, in her intercourse with him, to give this good breeding its fullest recognition, even to assuming it in the form which had been denied to it, as it were, by chance. She rose before speaking, and her reply made part of her "good-night," borrowing from it an impressiveness and finality which she would have hesitated to put into words.

"It is true that some things have been said to me about our acquaintance, and you

are quite right in supposing that they have annoyed me; but I have not asked you to come here out of social charity, Mr. Kincaid. You must accustom yourself to the idea that you can give pleasure as well as receive it." And her smile dismissed him, he hardly knew how.


CHAPTER V.

THE last day of May struck the first hot note of the season. Early in the day Marion had betaken herself to the coolest chamber in the house, where she had waited for the relief which could only come with sundown. Late in the afternoon the overcharged air found vent in a thunderstorm, and Brookfield emerged from her shower bath, glistening with moisture and drawing sensible breaths of relief.

Marion rose from her lounge, and, exchanging her dressing gown for a light street dress, went in search of still greater refreshment out of doors. Taking an overdue library book in her hand, she walked slowly down High Street, drinking in the cool, moist air, sweet with the breath of spring flowers in the old-fashioned gardens, and throbbing with the songs of birds. Before her the sky was blue and flecked with clouds which caught faint reflections from the sun-

set; but behind, fresh thunderheads lifted themselves above the horizon, showing that the apparent clearing was in reality only a breathing space for the storm.

She had changed her book, and had gone to the farther end of the street on a house-keeping errand, before she noticed how rapidly the sky had become overcast. As she left the shop where she had made her purchase, and which the proprietor had just closed for the night, she saw the impossibility of reaching shelter in the house of any friend before the storm broke. Already the wind, driven before the rain, was tossing the branches of the elm trees, and turning up the leaves of the Lombardy poplars which stood before the Town Hall. One or two big drops flung themselves impudently in her unprotected face; and, looking up, she saw the rain advancing in what seemed like a solid sheet of water. Looking about hastily for some refuge from the storm, her eye fell on the open door of Braddock's, the rejuvenated remains of the old tavern, which now did duty as an hotel. She knew nothing of the standing of the place, and at another moment she might have hesitated to enter it,



but now she scarcely gave the matter a thought.


As is the case with most houses of its stamp, the office opened directly on the narrow entrance hall, and Miss Clayton, as she came in, found herself unpleasantly near a group of men who were smoking and talking with noisy hilarity. She recollected the situation of the parlours, which in her girlhood had been the scene of some well-remembered dances, and was guided to the door by the sound of voices and laughter. Opening the door, she found herself in the midst of a group of young people, among whom she at once recognized familiar faces. In its centre Donald Keith, in the same jaunty dress in which he had appeared at the fair, was dancing what was apparently a breakdown with the girl whose silly boldness had won for her a permanent place among Miss Clayton's antipathies. The two were surrounded by an admiring group, in which they seemed to occupy the place of stars, and which laughed and applauded with vigour and regularity.

At the appearance of an elder person and a stranger, their gaiety was suddenly ar-

rested. At first they simply stared, and then began the irruption of the inevitable giggle, which spread from one to another, communicated by nudges and looks of preternatural solemnity. Young Keith's companion kept her place for a moment, swinging one foot with an affectation of bashfulness; then suddenly flung herself on a sofa, and, snatching a fan from one of the other girls, went into fits of suppressed laughter behind it, to the intense delight of her satellites, who revolved about her in new circles of admiring devotion.

From this ill-mannered confusion Donald Keith disengaged himself with a grace which commanded Marion's admiration. Making a very creditable bow, he said: "Won't you sit down, Miss Clayton? I'm afraid you'll think we're a very noisy crowd."

"Oh, thank you!" said Marion, trying to include the others in her civil smile. "I have only stopped for a moment to avoid the rain." As she spoke she moved to the window, as much to escape the necessity of sitting down in such unpromising company as to watch the progress of the shower. What she saw did not reassure her as to the length



of her stay, but she was visited by a happy thought for dispelling its awkwardness, and acted on it at once by turning around and saying:

"We seem likely to be fellow-prisoners for some time; would you like to dance a little? I shall be glad to play for you."

The giggles with which this offer was received were, as Marion plainly perceived, of a gratified nature, and she began to draw off her gloves and to walk toward the piano, smiling at Donald, who had hastened to open it for her, and whose ready politeness was as grateful in this atmosphere of social drought as are waters in the desert.

"It's awfully good of you," he said boyishly, as he swung the piano stool into place. "Are you sure you don't mind?"

"I like it," Marion answered cordially, and began to play a popular waltz, whose strains found instant acceptance with her audience. As she watched the young figures keeping enthusiastic time to her music, or leaning against the wall exhausted with their exertions, her heart softened to their repellent type. Yet, altogether, it was a back-

ground which seemed made to throw the fine quality of the boyish scapegrace into bright relief. Marion looked at him attentively, which resulted in her liking him the more, and in being struck more forcibly by the ingenuousness which seemed to keep him uncontaminated by such surroundings, as if he had been dowered by nature with the power to touch pitch and not be defiled. His fresh colour and fearless carriage spoke plainly of an outdoor life, and Marion could see no signs of dissipation more deadly than late hours and, perhaps, too enthusiastic defiance of public opinion.

She had passed from a waltz to a gallop and back again, and was considering the probable rural capacity for polking, when she missed Donald from among the dancers. In a moment she found him at her elbow.

"You must be awfully tired, Miss Clayton; don't let us use you up," he said in his fresh boyish voice.

"Oh, thank you!" replied Marion. "Dance music doesn't tire me in the least, but I'm afraid I ought to be going; it looks like a rainy night. How would they like a Virginia reel for the last?"

The proposition, conveyed to them by Donald, was received with enthusiasm, and followed by an intimation, too plain to be disregarded, that Julia Braddock (Marion referred her gladly to the hotel keeper) expected him to lead it in her company. Marion fancied that he did so with less alacrity than might have been expected from his previous attentions, and that the antics, engrafted by his partner upon the usual movements of the dance, received slighter appreciation than she wished. At the end of the reel Marion rose and resumed her gloves, receiving awkwardly tendered thanks from about half of the company; the others apparently looking upon her complacency as only a continuation of the good joke started by her entrance. Julia said nothing, but walked with ostentatious indifference to a window, where she stood, humming one of the gay tunes of the reel. Donald did not appear to notice her, but took his cap from the piano and followed Marion into the hall.

"Shan't I walk up with you, Miss Clayton? I've got an umbrella here, and if you'll just wait a minute I can get something to cover your dress."

There was a hint of suppressed eagerness in his voice which made Marion feel that the offer was not prompted by mere civility. It crossed her mind that he doubted whether she would be willing to make use of his escort, and she substituted a pleasant acceptance of his offer for the suggestion which she had been on the point of making, that he would try to find her a carriage. She qualified it, however, with a protest against taking him away from his friends.

He coloured and seemed unwilling to meet her eyes, as he murmured something to the effect that he thought they would manage to amuse themselves without him, and after a minute's pause said:

"Won't you go back and sit down while I get the things?"

"Thank you," Marion replied; "I think I will wait here."

After the boy's departure she drew back into a corner of the hall, struggling not to repent, in view of her long walk home, of her impulse of kindness to Donald Keith. If she was not completely successful, it was only from weakness of the flesh. Marion liked Donald, and after seeing him this evening

was less than ever able to understand the evident disfavour which marked every allusion to his name. It was like, and yet unlike, the feeling entertained against Walter Kincaid, and Marion could not resist the conviction that the prejudice against the two young men, though bearing different fruit, sprang in reality from one root. Into the nature of this root she did not at present inquire—she held moralizing to be unprofitable, and she was tired enough to shrink mentally from a subject through which she felt that she might have to suffer.

Through her weariness she became conscious of the sound of deliberate footsteps coming toward her from the end of the hall. There was something in their firm, yet leisurely tread which suggested the presence of a gentleman, and Marion, looking in the direction of the sound, was hardly surprised to recognize Gould Whetmore. For many years her acquaintance with this gentleman had been of the slightest, but it was rooted in the tenacious soil of a happy past; so that the sight of him was a pleasure which gained by its association with others which it served to suggest. She felt sure he must know her,

though the manner in which he removed his hat was that of one not wishing to take advantage of her recognition.

Our heroine did not easily believe herself slighted. She had been gifted at birth with a sense of proportion which all the circumstances of her life had combined to render more just. The place which she saw assigned to her in the general scheme of things was very nearly the one which she really occupied—a rare circumstance, as everyone will admit. In the matter of wounded love or outraged friendship, she might be uncommonly sensitive, though her sense of loyalty would never allow her to suffer from suspicion; but the highly cultivated vanity in which so many of us receive our worst hurts was represented in her only by a decent self-respect.

As Mr. Whetmore came toward her she was amazed at the change which a few years had wrought in his face. She did not attempt to analyze it, but it strengthened her original intention of speaking to him, and she said cordially:

“How do you do, Mr. Whetmore? I had no idea you were still in Brookfield.”

Gould Whetmore's fine face brightened sensibly, and he bowed with an impressiveness which removed the scene of their meeting quite above its sordid surroundings.

"I'm afraid it's a life sentence," he said, smiling slightly, and standing before her with the air of a soldier in presence of a commanding officer who may at any moment desire his withdrawal.

"Oh, don't say that!" replied Marion gayly. "Remember, you are speaking to a fellow inmate."

"Don't you think that word is even more unpleasantly suggestive of restraint?" he said, with a gleam of amusement in his face, and then, more gravely: "Did I understand correctly that you had *chosen* Brookfield as a place of residence?"

Marion smiled assent.

"After seeing 'all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them'?"

"Hardly that, but certainly after a sufficiently nomadic life."

"Not strictly nomadic, if I am correctly informed."

"There was very little that was rural about it, if you mean that."

"I suppose that is what has brought you here—the desire to round out your experience. You thought a great deal of that, I remember, in the old days."

He smiled down at her with his pleasant, tired eyes.

"I dare say you knew more of what I thought then than I did myself," feeling as she spoke that embarrassment which follows on the consciousness that our words are capable of a different construction from the one we intend.

Her companion relieved her at once:

"I dare say I was more expert analytically then, but you will be sure to have the advantage of me now. I have begun to descend the vale of years."

"I'm sorry to hear you speak in that way; I had hoped that the prime of life continued to move on with one," said Marion, wondering at the headway made by her companion's cynicism in the years since she had known him.

"It will, I am sure, with you," he replied, smiling.

At this moment Donald appeared in the doorway, with the mackintosh, rubber shoes,

and umbrella which he had found for Miss Clayton.

"My dear boy!" said Mr. Whetmore, "Miss Clayton ought to have a carriage."

"Oh, no!" Marion exclaimed, seeing Donald's look of dismay, "Mr. Keith is very kindly going to walk home with me."

"I'm afraid that is a trifle too rural for a beginner," said Mr. Whetmore, but he looked with pleasure from her to Don, and seemed to find in their obviously good understanding consolation for her probable discomfort.

As Marion fastened the last button of her mackintosh the parlor door opened, and the noisy young crowd appeared in the doorway, Julia Braddock leading the way. She nodded familiarly to Mr. Whetmore, who barely recognized her presence, and stared at Marion in a way meant to be disconcerting.

"I suppose you're gone for good, Don," she said with an affectation of indifference.

"I shall not be back this way to-night," said the young man with a look of annoyance, and without even glancing in her direction.

It was Marion's inclination to say to Mr. Whetmore that she hoped she might see him again—at her house; but besides that the place seemed hardly suited to the utterance of any personal preferences, she had a wish—almost fantastic about so conventional a matter—that he should be the first to express such a hope.

He knew his place too well, of course, to put any such wish into words, but as he gave up the umbrella to Donald, at the end of the short path, he said:

“It has been exceedingly pleasant to meet you,” and Marion replied:

“I hope you will let it happen again.”

The walk was so wet and windy as to give little chance for conversation, but Marion learned that her companion had lived ten years in Brookfield; that it was a goodish place if you managed to satisfy the people; that Mr. Whetmore was a stunner—a hero to boot—wasting the best years of his life to please his father; and the best friend a fellow ever had; that he, the fellow, was fond of riding, walking, and boating; that he owned a canoe, five dogs, and two horses, was a fair hand at tennis, and sometimes

took a turn at the bat; that he had graduated the year before at one of the smaller colleges, and was now in training at the factory for a place which he was to take in the Fall, in a town about fifty miles from Brookfield.

At the door of her house he declined her invitation to enter, glancing expressively at his wet garments, and to Marion's thanks for his kindness he replied:

"I don't believe you know how awfully jolly it was in you to let me come. I'm a forbidden subject, you know."

"I didn't know it was so bad as that," said Marion, laughing at the faint reflection of his patron's manner. "I shall reserve the right of private judgment, and I warn you I shall accept your escort whenever you offer it."

Donald ran down the walk, delighted with Miss Clayton, the world, and himself; while Marion took herself wearily, but on the whole happily, to bed.

CHAPTER VI.

As it has been intimated, Marion's girlhood was spent in Brookfield. After her father's death, which occurred too early in her life to leave her with any distinct remembrance of him, her mother had gone to the old homestead to care for the elder Mr. Clayton during the remainder of his life. This had not been long, and the winter that Marion was seventeen the house was closed, and she and her mother moved to New York. It was here that Mrs. Clayton showed the first symptoms of ill-health; but they were not alarming ones, and Marion enjoyed her first society winter with the zest of her years and temperament. Her chaperon was a charming woman; the young girl could not have entered society under happier auspices. It was at her house that she first met Gould Whetmore, a cousin german of her hostess, and her own elder by several years.

Gould Whetmore was the product of generations of high living and wide thinking,

and was born with a measure of cultivation for which more ambitious men sigh, in vain, through years of maturity. But this cultivation was of the mind and senses rather than of the soul and heart, and it yielded fruit after its kind. Its possessors were clever, with a comprehension of many things in which they desired no personal excellence, but they were preëminently men of the world; gentlemen, not so much by the grace of God as by the will of man. Personally, Gould Whetmore had, for a man of the world, a somewhat fastidious purity of heart, and his sweetness of nature was all his own, but he could not escape the traits which are characteristic of his type.

It is doubtful if Marion could do justice to the supreme refinement which was implied in her own spontaneity, and to Mr. Whetmore's obviously well-considered actions she had rendered an homage which was intelligent, but a little exaggerated.

On his part it may be said that he appreciated her, which is no light saying.

The situation had been ripe for a love episode, though at the time Marion was not aware of it. Looking back, she saw that he

had spared her, and she was grateful. This gratitude had kept his memory alive in her heart when a warmer sentiment might have killed it; yet, in the years that had elapsed since the first winter of their acquaintance, these two had been little to each other but a memory.

Mr. Whetmore's father had bought land near Brookfield and built a handsome house, which he used as a country seat, but Brookfield never took kindly to that form of residence. "He isn't a Brookfield man," passed from mouth to mouth, and the difference which formed the basis of their criticisms of him was a silent one of themselves, which they felt though they did not formulate it. Two years before the date of this story he had met with a stroke of paralysis, and, as it was early in the summer, and the doctors gave him only a few months to live, he had not at once moved to New York, and soon he became too ill for this to be possible. Gould was his youngest child, the only one unmarried, and his father clung to him with a passionate, if selfish, affection. From month to month their life together continued, the father's vitality resisting the dis-

ease, the son's devotion keeping him by his side.

Marion had often heard of Gould from her friends in the town, and she had been puzzled to reconcile these allusions with those which reached her from other sources; but as time advanced, and her interest in him declined, she made fewer and fewer attempts to do so.

Our heroine had never been in love. Those strings which some women stretch æolian-harp-wise in their windows she inclosed in her heart. Before that citadel could be reached there were outposts to be won, and the most that could be said of Gould Whetmore was that he had conquered some of them. She knew that he understood her, and she did not forget that the greater includes the less; but while many women cannot love without such knowledge, few have loved because of it.

It was imperative, however, that, with her return to Brookfield, her interest in him should revive. She owned to herself that she desired his acquaintance, and, in spite of covert warnings from more than one person, she determined at least not to avoid it.

Marion's purity was not of the negative order. She was warm and living to her finger tips as well as to her heart's core. Also, her life had been wide enough, and had included enough of the masculine element, to make it possible for her to condone some lapses, but contamination of nature placed its victim at once without the sphere of her influence. She herself recognized this, and it had been the thought of some such possibility in regard to Mr. Whetmore which had made her careful about making any declaration of her intentions with regard to him. But on his first visit, which occurred a few days after their meeting in the hotel, she experienced an almost complete reassurance in this regard. The childlike sense of freedom which, as a girl, she had been used to feel in his company, returned to her with his presence, and she gave herself up to it with a delight which spoke of recent restraint.

Their talk was foreign to the purpose of this story, being entirely of old times and friends of whom Marion had few chances to hear so directly. She listened eagerly, but at the same time observed closely the changes in her visitor.

The conventionality which had once seemed second nature had become punctiliousness too well considered to be quite pleasing, and cynicism had almost grown into bitterness, but the deep and strong sweetness of nature, of which Marion had more than once been made aware, welled up again and again, in spite of barriers built to hold it back.

At the end of the visit, which had lasted somewhat beyond conventional limits, Mr. Whetmore lingered uncharacteristically over his leave-taking. At last he said with some impressiveness:

"I cannot go without expressing to you the great pleasure this renewal of our acquaintance has given me."

"And me," Marion said with sweet cordiality.

"It is an added pleasure to know that you share it." He hesitated for a minute and then resumed: "I must tell you that if I had not understood from yourself that it would not be disagreeable to you to receive me, I should hardly have ventured to present myself."

It would be hard to express Marion's surprise at this declaration, whose unconven-

tionality was a guarantee of its necessity in the mind of the speaker. It was quite impossible for her to control this surprise, so that it seemed best to say frankly:

"I do not understand you in the least."

It was now Mr. Whetmore's turn to look surprised. For a moment he did not speak, and perhaps, since their schooldays, these two persons had never had so genuine a period of embarrassment.

Mr. Whetmore recovered himself first, and said:

"I beg your pardon; I took for granted that you were aware of my position in the town. It seems that I did not do justice to Brookfield reticence."

Marion felt distinctly annoyed. It seemed to her that Mr. Whetmore was stretching his punctiliousness too far, and she said, with some hint of her annoyance in her voice:

"I am not a native of Brookfield."

No," Mr. Whetmore said gently. "But you are even more at its mercy," and, as Marion did not reply, he went on: "At the risk of annoying you still further, I must say that, if at any time you should feel it necessary to repudiate our acquaintance, I shall

be glad to have you know that I acquiesce in your decision."

"Thank you," Marion said. "When I repudiate our acquaintance, I shall be grateful for your thoughtfulness!"

"I hope you will pardon me," Mr. Whetmore said anxiously. "My only excuse is that I could not have accepted your hospitality without speaking to you as I have done." And with this he withdrew.

After his departure, Marion threw herself into a favourite easy-chair, and, under cover of cutting the leaves of a new book, gave herself up to conjecture over her visitor's extraordinary conduct; her final explanation of it being that living in Brookfield had made Mr. Whetmore abnormally sensitive to the discomforts of evil report, and that his chivalrous desire to shield her from town gossip was at least a pardonable eccentricity.

CHAPTER VII.

MARION had now been six weeks in Brookfield, and for her the promise of country life remained largely unfulfilled. She could not count on being free from social formalities at any hour of the day, and the irruption of Florry Burnett into her bedroom during a refreshing midday-nap made her feel the necessity of taking some decided step. In this she found an unexpected ally in Miss Dempster, whose sense of the value of time had been outraged from her birth, and who was ready to counsel desperate measures on the part of a fellow-sufferer. Yet she felt bound to defend the village methods to Marion, whose silent criticism of them had begun to make itself felt.

"There is something very pleasant in the absence of formality in a small town," she began, in her amiably instructive manner. "At the root of it there are the best of motives,

and it is very difficult for anyone who has been brought up here to make any stand against it."

"It's a shameful abuse of power," said Marion with much heat. Whereupon she struck off half a dozen little notes to the principal social dignitaries in Brookfield to say that she would be at home every Monday.

Her first Monday was a perfect June day. Alice Dempster spent the morning with her, for Marion did not feel sure that her "day" would not begin before breakfast. The dear old house was swept and garnished, cool with the clear green reflections from the closed blinds, and exhaling fragrance from the bowls of June roses which Marion had placed in every available spot.

"It makes me quite uncomfortable to see the chairs," she said laughingly to Alice, as the two young women passed through the parlour on their way to the veranda after luncheon. "It looks like the ghost of a reception day."

"Oh, no; like the foreshadowing!" said Alice, blushing at her own insincerity, and beginning hastily to gather up her belongings preparatory to departure.

Marion helped her gravely, reserving for herself her sense of amusement. It was plain that Alice looked upon her social venture as a sinking ship.

As she turned back to the veranda, after walking with her friend to the gate, she told herself that she was not sufficiently alive to the foolishness of her position in having announced herself "at home" to persons manifestly uninterested in the fact. Yet she found herself unable to do more than admit the absurdity, and inclined to take consolation from the likelihood that her afternoon nap was vouchsafed to her by Fate. She had just begun to anticipate its pleasures on her veranda lounge, when the footsteps of her first visitor sounded on the walk, and she sprang guiltily to her feet.

After a moment or two spent in pursuit of flying hairpins and a readjustment of her dress, Marion entered the parlour in time to see Florry Burnett making use of the unexpected good fortune of a pier glass to verify her confidence in the drapery of a smart summer silk, glistening with newness, and creaking demonstrably in its efforts to contain its wearer's buxom person. This defied the

rigours of tight lacing, and threatened at any moment to set at defiance the array of glittering buttons which twinkled mischievously at the sense of their responsibility.

Marion's soft white muslin had the elaborate simplicity of everything French, and seemed to Florry so inferior to her own aggressively stylish costume as to set that young person very much at her ease.

"Well, I thought I'd come up and see how you were getting on," she began, with an expressive glance at the empty parlour, with its almost painful air of suspense.

"Thank you," said Marion, "I am doing very well."

"I must say you've got a perfect day," went on Florry mercilessly. "Had anybody yet?"

"Why, yes," said Marion, laughing; "I've had you. Aren't you Brookfield society in person?"

"Oh, I guess nothing as great as that," replied Florry, with a gratified laugh. "You needn't be discouraged," she resumed. "I shouldn't wonder if you had quite a lot of people before night."

"There's a pleasant fiction that a reception

day exists for the benefit of one's friends," said Marion. "You speak as if I were giving a party."

"Why, aren't you?" exclaimed Florry, staring hard at the tray with its cups of tea and chocolate and piles of thin bread and butter, which the maid was bringing in at the door.

"I thought it would be pleasant for my friends to know of one day when they could be sure of finding me at home, and disengaged," said Marion. "I feel really mortified at denying myself so often to visitors, but you see I am not very strong, and I don't feel that I can quite give up all my own hours."

She made this explanation with some precision, knowing how far it would travel, and feeling a little as if she had mounted the platform of the Town Hall to address a full audience of her Brookfield acquaintances.

"Oh, I see!" said Florry, helping herself to bread and butter and wondering if Marion's cook didn't make good cake. "Well, I don't think that's at all a bad idea."

"I'm delighted to hear you say so," said Marion.

Miss Burnett received this tribute to her

supremacy in silence, and for the few following minutes gave herself up unreservedly to the pleasure of eating and drinking; then setting down her cup she said:

"Well, I came early because I wanted to talk to you. I heard you were all over town the other night with Donald Keith."

Marion stirred her tea gently, lifting her spoon now and then, and watching the clear amber drops fall from its bowl. Her face was placid to inexpressiveness, and only the vibrating tip of a yellow satin slipper testified to her annoyance. After a minute she said:

"You weren't very correctly informed; but what of it?"

"I should think you ought to know that nobody has anything to do with Don now."

"I should think I ought to know why," said Marion with ominous quiet.

"Do you mean to say you don't?" exclaimed Florry, and, in fact, Marion did not. Since the night of the fair, when Kitty had betrayed so much feeling at the mention of his name, Marion had hesitated to speak it; it seemed almost as if, in doing so, she would violate a confidence; and although she had

not missed hearing allusions to him as a *mauvais sujet*, she had never followed them up by inquiries.

To Florry, curiosity and the attempt to gratify it seemed such legitimate exercises of the mental powers that it is doubtful if she could have even understood Marion's position, and certain that she would give it scant sympathy. She seized the chance of enlightening her with characteristic fervour.

"I should think the way he's treated Kitty was enough—going on so that she had to break her engagement."

"Was she engaged to him?" exclaimed Marion.

"Did you ever know anything so crazy? At their age! You didn't catch me approving of it: that boy has been wild ever since he was born."

"What did he do?" Marion asked. "You say he was wild, but that may mean anything."

"You'd better ask what he didn't do," said Florry. "You know he went to Princeton? Well, he brought some boys up here in the vacation, and the things they did were simply abominable. Why, there was a dread-

ful scandal about one of them and a mill girl up in the North Village. One night they all got drunk and went down High Street at three o'clock in the morning, and stopped under Kitty's window to serenade her."

"That was when she broke the engagement," suggested Marion.

"Yes. But, if you'll believe it, she didn't want to. You can't get much out of Kitty, but she said, 'Don was so full of fun' and 'so devoted to his friends,' and she 'thought she ought to be patient with him.' Patient! Well, I just went up there and *stayed*. Aunt Letty's about as much good, such times, as mush and molasses. She couldn't do anything but cry, and say Kitty must 'use her own judgment.' I told her that was all very well, if she had any to use; and I asked Kitty if she was going to marry Don, and let him get drunk to please his friends. I told her if she cared anything about him, she'd make him understand that he'd got to behave himself, or she wouldn't have anything more to say to him. I don't believe he's been near her since."

"Poor child!" exclaimed Marion involuntarily. "He doesn't seem to have responded



very well to your line of treatment," she added.


"Oh! I guess he was too far gone for that," said Florry easily. "It just shows how lucky she was to get rid of him."

"Poor child!" Marion said again.

"Well, I thought you ought to know," said Florry. "There's no sense in anyone petting him up. If Kitty——"

At this moment steps were heard on the walk. Marion and Florry glanced up at the half-opened blind of a front window and saw three young girls coming up to the door. Kitty walked in the middle, carrying her stately young figure with her usual girlish grace. Her companions were girls whom Marion had entertained, the week before, at luncheon.

If it was proper to have any guilty feeling at the sudden appearance of the subject of their conversation, Marion fulfilled the conditions for both herself and Florry, to whom such a fate was too common to be noted. Miss Clayton felt herself reddening as she went forward to meet Kitty, and her greeting to her was tinged with the warmth of her shame.



Her companions were a striking contrast to her, and to each other. Maud Prouty was of the sentimental type of girlhood, but Lottie Parkman was one of those young women whom America turns out by the dozen, and who, like Minerva, seem to have sprung into the world fully equipped for the battle of life.

Of this equipment, self-possession was not the least obtrusive feature, and Lottie hardly waited for Marion to speak to the other girls before beginning the conversation by saying:

"It's just lovely of you to have a reception day, Miss Clayton."

"Perfectly lovely!" murmured Maud, and Kitty added:

"Nobody in Brookfield ever had one before."

"Well, I must be going," said Florry abruptly, with some difficulty pulling herself to her feet. Marion thought she regarded Lottie with scant favour, as the reigning sovereign might the next in succession to the throne. She nodded to the girls and said, as she shook hands with Marion:

"We'll speak again about—you know what—— Don't come out with me," she

added; and Marion, glad of the hint, went with her to the door.

When she came back the girls were commenting on Florry's costume.

"I don't see how she can stand that bonnet—with those strings," said Lottie, exceedingly conscious of the superior fashion of her much misshapen Leghorn. "She had it on that hot Sunday in church, and the perspiration just rolled off her face."

"There is a French proverb that one 'cannot suffer if one is beautiful,'" said Marion, without giving her words much thought.

"Why, Miss Clayton, do you think Florry is?" asked Kitty, with innocent surprise, while Lottie laughed and gave Marion such a shrewd little look as to make her, for a moment, quite uncomfortable.

She felt relieved when Maud, whose eyes had been wandering around the room, said suddenly:

"Oh, Miss Clayton! isn't that one of Velma's paintings?"

"Yes," Marion said, following the direction of her eyes to the place where the little sketch was hanging, suitably framed.

"Isn't it sweet?" bubbled Maud. "I do think Velma's things are perfectly lovely."

"Well, I don't," said Lottie, with what seemed spiteful decision, "I don't see why Velma's things are a bit better than Mattie's, or Clara's, or any of the other girls'. Do you, Kitty?"

"I don't see why," Kitty answered, "but I do think they are. I know in school when we had to draw those stupid casts, Velma always made hers look like a picture; they weren't a bit like ours."

"I should think if she made such an awfully good picture, it ought to have looked just like them, and I'm sure they were ugly enough," said Lottie, altering the place of some pins in her bodice with ostentatious indifference to her superiority in argument.

"I'm afraid I don't agree with you," Marion said gently. "We could all learn to paint something we see, just as we could write a description of it, but one wouldn't be Art any more than the other would be Literature. To paint its soul—— Ah, that——" and Marion raised her eyes involuntarily to the walls of the parlour, where she had hung semblances of some of those great paintings

which for so many centuries have dominated the world.

Kitty's eyes kindled as they followed hers, and Maud basked in the warmth of her manner; but Lottie remained obdurate, saying that she didn't see it, and she thought there was altogether too much fuss made over Velma—"just a common North Village girl."

"I like Velma," Kitty said quickly. "I don't call her common; do you, Miss Marion?"

"I don't know her," Marion answered; "but if I can judge of her by her brother, I should say she was very far from it," and she resolutely led the talk into other channels.

Marion's social venture proved, after all, a success. Brookfield took the hint offered by so formal an announcement as that of a reception day, and for once compressed its calling hours into conventional limits. Among the most fashionably timed arrivals was that of Aunt Susan Clapp, who came to scoff but remained to enjoy a confab with some of her special cronies. During her visit Uncle 'Lias appeared also, having relied too implicitly on his wife's express determination

not to countenance "any of Marion's foolery." His usual imperturbability of manner did not desert him at sight of Mrs. Clapp, but he dropped into a seat by the door, saying to Marion, who came to sit by him:

"Guess I'll sit here. I might get too warm a reception up there by Susan."

In the meantime, Mrs. Clapp was saying to all whom it might concern:

"Well, if there aint Elias Clapp! Guess if I'd asked him to come with me, there'd have been a pretty to do. I should think he was 'most crazy—walking 'way up here in the hot sun."

At this stage Marion's visitors were so numerous and of so self-possessed a character that she was virtually relieved from the duties of hostess, and was herself entertained by much characteristic talk on village matters. This touched upon things spiritual as well as temporal, and she was forced to notice how, in its course, religion declined into morality, morality into propriety, and propriety into Dempsterism. This last might be appropriately described as the science of making things pay. Not necessarily in a money way, though Marion always fancied

that she saw the almighty dollar lurking in the background, but in a sufficiently material sense to insure general recognition of success. It was an essential element of this demand for results that its satisfaction should be prompt. "Pay as you go" had been the immemorial motto of the Dempsters, and even the Muses could not be excused from living up to it.

The application of this principle was shown in the discussion about the merits of a former pastor of the Congregational Church, to which body most of those present belonged.

"I shall always say," pronounced Mrs. Robert Burnett, in her strong, steady voice, "that Mr. Chandler was a good man."

"I don't see what you want more than that," said a gentle-looking little old lady, whose tone indicated that she was often in the minority.

"I guess I think about as much of goodness as anybody," asserted Mrs. Clapp, "but I say you've got to have preaching, and it's got to be the kind that 'll make folks come. They do say Mr. Chandler used to tell folks they'd better go over to the Methodist or

up to the Episcopal—they'd be better suited. That was great doings, wasn't it? I'd like to know what kind of a church he'd have in a little while, going on that way."

"Pretty darned peaceful," said Uncle 'Lias under his breath.

"That was just what Mr. Purcell used to like," observed the quiet lady who had spoken before Mrs. Clapp. "He said Parson Chandler had the cause of Christ at heart, instead of just trying to run a particular sect."

"Cause of Christ!" exclaimed Mrs. Clapp, who did not in the least mean to be irreverent, but simply wished to signify that she thought better of the Master than that came to. "I don't see but what Mr. Purcell was just as bad," she went on; "that man never knew how to get on the right side of people."

"It is in my opinion that he did not wish to," said Mrs. Burnett, who always entered the conversation with a heavy foot. "He made that very clear to me when I went to him at the time Florry attended his school. I told him plainly that there was great dissatisfaction with his methods. 'I don't

doubt it, madam.' That was all he said," concluded Mrs. Burnett with appropriate solemnity.

"I guess they found out that we knew what we wanted," said Mrs. Clapp, thus darkly hinting at the fate of the two gentlemen under discussion.

Marion inferred that this fate had been nothing short of banishment, and she was just wondering in what quarters of the world they were lamenting their respective failures, when Mr. Clapp enlightened her by saying as he rose to go:

"Well, they do say Parson Chandler gets four thousand a year from that city church of his, and Draper told me yesterday that they've made Purcell Superintendent of Schools in Milwaukee. Not but what they must feel pretty bad not to have suited Brookfield," he added with a subdued twinkle in his eye.

"It does very well for you to talk, 'Lias Clapp," responded his wife. In which dark utterance she may be supposed to have referred to the lifelong inability of her partner to come up to the standard of the Dempsters.

But Marion's most singular visitor was reserved for the last. Some ladies who had come at the same time with Mrs. Clapp had taken their departure with her, and their hostess stood at the window, watching them as they bobbed sociably down the street. She was just about to turn back into the room, and ring for the maid to take away the tea-table, when she saw, at the gate, a figure which was plainly that of a belated visitor.

In looking at her, Marion felt as we do in a strange land when we come suddenly upon a compatriot, so plainly did the little lady speak of a civilization other than that of Brookfield. There was something unmistakably French about the dainty completeness of her costume; and her walk and carriage, the very way of holding her card-case, were as carefully chosen as were the articles of her dress. The cleverness with which the advantages of her type had been seized upon and delicately accented gave the effect of prettiness to a face and a figure which, left to themselves, would have had little to recommend them.

Marion admired and wondered and racked her brain for the name which would not come,

and yet was half suggested by her visitor's appearance, foreign as it was to anything which she actually remembered.

Mary's announcement of "Mrs. Farraday" did not clear up the mystery, and that there was one the lady seemed to divine with bird-like quickness, for she said as she came forward to take Marion's hand:

"I see you don't remember me in the least. Oh, don't protest" (Marion had no intention of doing so)! "I assure you I take it as a compliment, and, in fact, I don't think we ever knew each other; but don't you remember Lizzie West?"

"In the little white house on the River Road?" exclaimed Marion.

"Exactly," Mrs. Farraday replied, looking about for a chair, and finally perching herself on a big straw ottoman whose low back she disdained, and from which she looked as if she might at any moment take flight.

Marion remembered Lizzie West perfectly. The girl had belonged to a set distinctly below her own, and her ill-regulated love of finery and uncompromising plainness made her discontent with this position only a disadvantage. It was hard to keep surprise

within conventional limits, but Marion only said:

"I had not heard that you were married."

"That was rather an unusual piece of good fortune for me," replied her visitor. "Sooner or later you will have to hear my history, unless I am more insignificant than I dare to hope, so I will be thoroughly disinterested and advise you to have it from Mrs. Clapp herself; no one else can do it justice."

She laughed lightly, and Marion quickly replied:

"Aunt Susan's powers of narrative are an honour to the town; we must be content to serve our turn as subjects."

"Oh, yes! but it isn't everyone who gives her such a brilliant opportunity as I have done. However, we won't enlarge upon that. Tell me how you like Brookfield."

"Oh! Brookfield and I are old friends," answered Marion. "I have been its admirer ever since I can remember."

"And your admiration stands the test of time?" asked her companion, with a keen look. "I must say I envy you. I confess that with me and these old associations—

well, some day I look up, and there isn't anything on the pedestal."

"You shouldn't look up," said Marion, laughing.

She was not deaf to the note of bitterness in her visitor's talk, but it was hard to take her seriously, so lightly did she seem to take herself.

"I am glad that you have learned that in time," Mrs. Farraday answered with emphasis. "I suppose," she continued after a second's pause, "that you are a good deal with Alice Dempster."

Marion suspected something a little sinister in the close connection of this remark with the preceding ones, but she had the high-bred habit of taking conversation at its face value, and replied pleasantly:

"Yes, Alice and I are renewing our youth—you may remember that we were almost inseparable then."

"I do, indeed; I used often to envy her," answered Mrs. Farraday, and as Marion was about to protest, she went on quickly, "Alice and I don't quite—gee." She threw out the crude little word with a pretty, petulant air of having no better at hand. "I've never

been able to like courses of reading; and then, I'm not a member of the Church, or anything else that's good and regular."

"You are not at all singular in not coming up to Alice's standard," said Marion civilly; "I am glad to think that she does not make that a condition of friendship."

"Oh, well! I fail particularly," said Mrs. Farraday, "and the worst of it is that I don't yearn more after success. The sight of such perfection affects me the way mountain peaks do—I admire, but I don't like to climb."

In listening to this lightness, Marion felt a disloyalty to Alice from which she instinctively shrank, but she scarcely knew how to avoid it without incivility to her guest, and without making too much of what might be, after all, mere chatter; so she turned the conversation rather pointedly by saying:

"How do you pass your time in Brookfield, if you don't care for what is good and regular?"

"I don't wonder you ask," replied Mrs. Farraday, laughing, "especially as you don't know how poor we are. Aunt Esther and I do all our own work, and I earn money when

I can. I don't do anything well, but I don't do anything very badly, so I usually get paid for it. I dislike it, of course, so I grumble a good deal, and that takes all the time there is left."

She said all this with such perfect nonchalance that the essential vulgarity of telling a stranger so much about herself was not offensively apparent; still, Marion wished that she would be less personal in her application of every subject, and tried to lead away from the temptation by speaking of the beauty of Brookfield; but this merely led her visitor to say:

"We don't see much of it unless we walk, and I confess that I don't care much about that form of exercise. You see, Miss Clayton, I was intended for a life of splendour."

Marion smiled and said that it was a common trait. She was amused by her caller's brightness, but against her will. The little lady divined this with her usual quickness, and did all which perhaps lay in her power, by speaking of others instead of herself. She may have felt annoyed with Marion for the silent criticism of her taste,

and possibly she revenged herself in her next speech, which was:

"I have been much interested in your ideas of Brookfield—as part of your experience—I wish I might have your faculty of getting something out of even country dulness."

"I am afraid your informant exaggerated my desire for self-improvement," said Marion. "I thought I came to Brookfield because I loved it."

"Mr. Whetmore spoke with confidence, but you know he has always a little the air of 'knowing it all,' and perhaps you had not confided in him so fully as he thought."

"I did not know that I had done so at all," answered Marion, feeling as annoyed with Mr. Whetmore as Mrs. Farraday could wish.

That lady did not reply directly, but said:

"I suppose you know Mr. Whetmore very well."

"Not at all well," Marion answered. "We saw a great deal of each other one winter in New York, a good many years ago; but I was too young then to know anyone very well."

"I have always wondered whether there

was any truth in the reports of his dissipation," said Mrs. Farraday tentatively.

Marion did not reply; so after a minute her visitor said:

"Brookfield is so censorious. Poor Donald Keith, now—don't you think he has been shamefully treated?"

"I don't know very much about it," Marion answered, "but, from all I hear, he was not going on in a way to win the approval of any town."

"Poor boy! What had he done but try to get a little fun out of life?"

"I don't know, I am sure," Marion said; "and really I would rather not; it would not serve any very good purpose."

"Perhaps you are right," Mrs. Farraday rejoined, resigning her intention with a light sigh; "but really you must agree with me that he hasn't been well treated."

"It wouldn't have been my way of working his reformation, but it is possible that it may be a better one," Marion answered, rising with her guest.

The latter shook her plumage with a pretty grace.

"I do hope you will come to see me,

Miss Clayton. It will really be an act of charity."

"I am sure I do not need that motive," replied Marion pleasantly.

Mrs. Farraday had repudiated the hand-shaking customs of Brookfield. Seeing this, Marion simply bowed, and, tired out, sank into a chair, as her visitor skimmed off down the walk.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE day following was the one which had been set apart by Marion and Alice for reading aloud. To Marion this form of mental improvement seemed unnecessarily circuitous, but Alice was of that order of New England being to whom there is no true community of soul which has not been cemented by a course of reading.

The subject had been broached during Marion's first week at Brookfield. The friends were in the library: Alice resewing the breadths of a Bagdad portière, caught together in the slipshod Oriental fashion; Marion perched upon a step-ladder, taking measurements for her curtains.

"I have been thinking lately," Alice began, breaking a long silence, "that we ought to do something together this summer."

"Of course," Marion said absently, Miss Dempster's suggestion but half making its way through the nebulous mass of decora-

tive ideas by which she was surrounded. "We must do a great many things. That was what I came here for," she added with affectionate exaggeration.

"Of course we shall be a great deal in each other's society," Alice replied, "but that is all the more reason we should give some of the time to something improving. Don't you think so?"

"I hadn't thought of it in quite that way," admitted Marion, rolling up her tape measure and beginning to come down. Alice had, as usual, roused her sense of fun, and that had, in turn, brought her mind back to the present. She picked up a muslin curtain, drew her chair to the fire, and began to sew, saying:

"I might propose that we should drive together; that would be improving to me, because you could tell me so much about the country; or that we should lie out under a tree; that would be good for you, because you know you don't spend half enough time out of doors; but I suppose you were thinking of something more purely mental." The impulse to tease Miss Dempster was irresistible.

Alice smiled a little uneasily. She did not always know Marion's jest from Marion's earnest, and had just enough sense of humour to wish to conceal the fact. "I had thought we might read something aloud," she said.

Marion acquiesced in this inevitable suggestion, and asked:

"What shall it be?"

Alice laid down her work, the better to enjoy the pleasures of choice.

"I had thought of several subjects. Of course, there is always history."

"'Motley's Dutch Republic,'" murmured Marion.

"To tell the truth," said Miss Dempster with courageous candour, "that seems a little heavy for summer. Don't you think so?"

"Perhaps," admitted Marion, resisting an impulse to try a difficult ornament in a hitherto unthought-of place. "You wouldn't care to take up fiction?" she asked, using the word in deference to Miss Dempster's literary tastes.

"Well, not contemporary fiction," said Alice, "but I confess I had thought of the early English dramatists."

"For reading aloud?" Marion asked in

some surprise. "Why, Alice, I thought you couldn't even read the daily papers."

"Oh, that is a different matter!" Miss Dempster replied. "Of course," she added, "we should have an expurgated edition."

"Oh, of course!" said Marion, getting up hastily to measure a window sash.

As may be imagined, the course of reading then inaugurated was not altogether successful. Very slight interruptions were enough to make the reader close the book (with the finger in the place), but this was too often followed by a more permanent mark, and by the appearance from Miss Dempster's pocket of the thread edging which she kept for "catch up work." Then ensued a flow of conversation which led very far from the early English dramatists.

On the day in question it was natural that this interruption should take place rather earlier than usual, especially as Alice had something on her mind which she wished to disclose at the first favourable opportunity. This was given by Marion's account of her visitors, whom she named in order, closing with Mrs. Farraday, about whom she wished to ask her friend.

"You certainly must remember Lizzie West; she lived in that little white house on the River Road."

"The girl who used to do her hair up on papers and pretend it curled naturally, and who always wore dresses made out of her aunt's?"

Alice assented.

"It sounds like a Christmas pantomime. Where does she get her clothes and her style?"

"She makes the clothes herself and the money to buy them, so she says. I don't think she has anything from her husband."

"Is he living?" asked Marion.

"Oh, yes! I believe so," said Alice, with a manner which plainly marked her sense of Mr. Farraday's position in the moral universe. "She hasn't lived with him since the first year of their marriage."

"They spent that in Paris," Marion said with confidence. "And who was her husband?"

"I don't know," Alice said, with fine disdain of the subject. "Some artist who stayed at the hotel." The word "artist" given with

an accent which made it seem only another word for vagabond!

And here we may stop long enough to wonder at the serious aberration of the New England mind on the subject of art. Music and Oratory, those favoured handmaids of the Lord, have found grace in the eyes of His Puritan servants from the earliest days; but Sculpture and Painting, excluded from the sanctuary, scarcely beg their bread from door to door. How richly they can revenge themselves for centuries of neglect, any intelligent sojourner in a New England town must know.

Marion's mind was running on some such thoughts, and Mrs. Farraday might not have entered the conversation again if Miss Dempster had not had a purpose in keeping her there.

"Lizzie has never had much to say about her married life," she said tentatively.

"It must be about the only subject, then," laughed Marion. "She didn't strike me as a reticent person."

"No," Alice said, taking conscientious advantage of her opportunity, "and that is what makes it seem a pity that you should

have talked over Kitty's affairs with her." She coloured as she spoke, in the slow, thorough manner of persons of her temperament. Duty lost half its pleasures when it took the form of rebuking Marion, for whom Alice had the tenderness reserved for interesting children. Miss Clayton was plainly aghast at this accusation, which fell from a sky as clear as that which harboured the traditional thunderbolt.

"Talked over Kitty's affairs! My dear Alice, how could I do such a thing?"

"She repeated what you said, to someone who carried it to Kitty," said Miss Dempster, speaking from the momentum of her original intention, and not in wilful rejection of Marion's amazed denial.

"She repeated what I didn't say," Marion protested. "I wish you would stop that interminable edging, Alice, and let me see what you mean."

Miss Dempster laid down her work and folded her hands in her lap.

"I am very sorry if I have made a mistake, but I thought you would rather have me speak about it." She was really sorry and ashamed, but the face of a person who so

conscientiously makes for righteousness is not commonly trained to expressions of humility.

"Of course, I would rather have you speak," said Marion, with traces in her voice of the vexation she tried to control; "but I wish you might have spoken with a little more faith."

"I am sorry," Alice repeated stiffly. "So much is made out of so little."

Marion saw that there would be no real satisfaction without a more explicit denial, and she found herself fairly willing to make it. She was often quickly resentful, but never persistently so, and her sense of humour was not proof against the picture of Miss Dempster deprived of confidence in herself, and not supported by any in Marion.

"Mrs. Farraday would talk, and all roads led to Brookfield. I could not say less than 'Yes' and 'No.' I tried to be as non-committal as I could, and I certainly expressed nothing about Kitty, unless it was my warm admiration."

Miss Dempster looked up with as genuine an expression of surprise as if she had never before been caught in a Brookfield trap.

"She said that you entirely agreed with her that Donald had been outrageously treated."

"She asked me, if I remember rightly, whether I thought the best way to reform a young man was to shut him out of all the good society in town, and I admitted that I did not."

"I suppose she considered that as equivalent to an admission that you thought Kitty should not have broken with him."

Marion was silent.

"You do think so, do you not?"

"I know nothing at all about it. It may very well be that she did exactly what was right, but I cannot see how that affects his treatment by others. As I understand it, you have all thrown him over."

"He has not merited any other treatment," said Alice.

Marion gave an expressive gesture. She rose impulsively to her feet, and walked quickly the length of the veranda. This action had no significance, except as the expression of unbearable impatience, of baffled effort, as when one struggles unsuccessfully with the undoing of a bandage. At the end

of the veranda she stopped. This part of her place was thickly wooded; but a gap had been cut in the trees, through which could be seen the peak of a mountain so distant as to seem cloudlike. This was approached by a succession of lesser hills, around the lowest of which swept the river on its way to the meadows.

Marion had always professed to herself to like this view, but she turned from it now, with an impatience which was not unlike that with which she had turned from Alice a moment before. She remembered a feeling that she had had in her girlhood, that the mountains shut her in. "The best thing about it is the river, and that is going to the sea."

As she turned to walk back, and saw Alice sitting calmly in her place, she felt a little ashamed of her impulsiveness, and relented somewhat toward her friend, whose hardness was so nearly allied to that of her native hills. She stopped by her chair and stooped to offer a conciliatory kiss, for the reception of which perhaps Alice was not so reluctant as she looked.

"I know you mean to do good, Marion,"

she began, with the air of making the most important concession in her power; and there she paused, embarrassed perhaps by her sense of the misapplication of Miss Clayton's supposed effort.

It is hard to say why this supposition, which implied the highest honour in Miss Dempster's gift, an honour that she had stretched a point to offer her friend, should have irritated Marion afresh; except that, in the matter of philanthropy, Miss Clayton was distinctly in advance of her age, holding that its legitimate exercise lay mainly in the right life and the helping hand. That strenuous effort to rebuild the small portion of the world which comes under our notice, called technically "doing good," seemed to her always ill-advised, and often disastrous. It was not the first time that she had fallen foul of one of its devotees, and she had learned to dread the encounter as productive of no good and much misunderstanding. So she replied quietly:

"I mean to do right, if that is what you mean, Alice; but I am not carrying out any scheme of reformation. You surely should

be glad of that," she added, as Alice preserved what seemed to be a displeased silence.

"I do not always understand you, Marion," Alice replied at length; but her tone suggested a failure on Miss Clayton's part rather than hers.

"I am truly sorry," Marion sighed sincerely. "It seems to me that I am clear, to transparency."

"But I feel constrained to tell you," Miss Dempster continued, as if Marion had not spoken, "that I think you will do harm if you attempt to reverse the decision of Brookfield in regard to certain persons."

"I have not thought of doing anything of the kind," said Marion, with a quiet which with her was ominous. "But who are the persons?"

"Donald Keith is one," said Alice with decision. "I do not speak of Walter Kincaid, because I think that is another matter, but I do trust that you will not think of renewing your acquaintance with Gould Whetmore—a man who is responsible for so much that is unfortunate in the town."

Marion did not speak at once; she seemed lost in thought, out of which a determination grew slowly. Finally she said:

"I think you ought to tell me what grounds you have for your assertion. Mr. Whetmore is my friend."

For a moment Miss Dempster shifted uneasily in her chair; then, with more abruptness than she often permitted herself to use, she said:

"People criticise his relation to Mrs. Faraday."

For a few minutes the two young women faced each other in silence, one flushed face answering another. Such subjects were not often mentioned between them. Marion spoke first:

"What reason have they for doing so?"

"He was a friend of her husband—they were all together in Paris—he helped her to get away from him—it is known that he gives her money—and goes there," concluded Miss Dempster rather lamely.

Marion did not need any more on that subject. She was familiar enough with Miss Dempster's mind to know that, however fully she might concur in the town opinions, in

stating them she never lent herself to exaggeration. She was shocked that such suspicions should be entertained of one who was too nearly her friend to make summary sacrifice of his acquaintance a slight matter. It was rather grimly that she said:

“Is there any other count?”

“He has a general reputation for fast living,” Alice replied, “and I think the way he has encouraged Donald in his courses is almost the worst. It seems to be a great opportunity for you to show Brookfield that you are on the side of the right, by denying your friendship to such a man,” she said, after a moment’s pause.

Marion was so long in making a reply that Alice might be excused for concluding that she had none to make, and beginning to get ready to go by putting away her work and taking up her garden hat and parasol. Miss Clayton made no objection to her going, for she longed to be alone; she rose with her, and to Miss Dempster’s questioning look replied:

“I will think earnestly of what you have told me; but, dear Allie, you ask a great deal.”

"I do not think it is too much to give up one's fancies for the good of others," said Miss Dempster sententiously.

Marion flushed quickly.

"I was not thinking of persons, but of principles. I suppose you credit me with having them, Alice."

Alice stooped to pick up her book, and carefully adjusted the mark before speaking. Her somewhat ruthless candour struggled with tenderness for Marion, and she finally contented herself by expressing her misgivings mainly in her tone. Her words were:

"Yes, but it seems to me that you should hold them with more sense of accountability."

"I will try," Marion said meekly, but as Alice walked away she murmured to herself:

"Accountability to what? Not Brookfield, surely!"

CHAPTER IX.

ONE of Marion's first acts on coming to the old homestead had been to revive the garden, which even during her remembrance had been one of the glories of the place. It had been laid out at some distance from the house, beyond the orchard, which also screened it from the street; and, to Marion, the seclusion enhanced its value tenfold. "You need never look for me in the garden, Mary," she had once said to the maid.

It was here that she took refuge on the morning succeeding her talk with Alice; a pile of new books beside her, on the garden seat, emphasizing her refreshing idleness by their unobtrusive suggestion of the travail of the world. Marion did not attempt to read, and scarcely did she seem to use her other surroundings as anything but a background for her mood.

It was this capacity in Marion for "lying fallow" which shaped her life to such flower-

like perfection, so different from the painfully wrought completeness of many of her friends. She felt its value; and yet, being human, she often had moments of doubting whether, while her brain said "wisdom," it might not be "sloth" that was written on her heart.

On this day—as if the shadow of Miss Dempster had been cast across her path—these doubts were uncommonly active; they did not amount to a distinct call to effort in any direction, but they made her more ready than usual to welcome intrusion, and the sight of Mary's white cap and apron, making toward her through the orchard, suggested relief rather than annoyance.

"Well, Mary," she said, as the maid reached her, breathless and apologetic.

"Well, ma'am, Mr. Kincaid's up to the house. I told him you was out, but he said he wanted to see you very particular, and he'd come in and wait; so I thought I'd maybe better come out and let you know."

"You did quite right," Miss Clayton said, hoping that her dignified manner would save her from the reproach of inconsistency. "You may ask Mr. Kincaid if he will please

come into the garden." And, as Mary retreated, she acknowledged to herself the good fortune of an arrival so in sympathy with her mood. But as Walter Kincaid came toward her she felt pleasure in his presence, not as an interruption, but as a man, and a certain repressed uneasiness received comfort from the suggestion that this defiance of Brookfield had received ample justification.

Walter Kincaid's face, which never failed to reflect his pleasure in meeting her, was this morning uncommonly bright. He could not wait to reach her before speaking, but said as he walked quickly down the path:

"I'm real glad you're out here."

"Why?" Marion asked, smiling.

"Oh, I don't know; I guess I feel better outdoors; there's more room for my hands and feet," smiling down ruefully at those fully developed parts of his person.

"I know that feeling," Marion said, laughing. "When I was a girl, I grew too fast, but it never was fast enough for my feet and hands. I used to distress my mother inexpressibly by my efforts to conceal them."

Walter had by this time seated himself on the grass at Marion's feet, and he looked up,

a little incredulously, at her as she sat wrapped in the self-possession which seemed to her adorer to be her most inalienable charm.

"I guess that was a good while ago," he said.

"One has a long memory for one's own awkwardness," Marion rejoined. Her eyes were resting on his face, and after a minute's study of it she had a sudden conviction of its meaning.

"You have news for me, haven't you?"

"How did you know?" he exclaimed.

"I should be very dull not to know," she answered. "What is it?"

"I went to see that gentleman yesterday."

"Mr. Mayhew?"

"Yes."

Marion leaned forward eagerly.

"What did he say?" she asked.

"Oh, he said he could get me a place in an architect's office right off. There wouldn't be much pay, and I'd have to study some evenings; but he thought it would keep me the first year."

Marion's face fell a little, and to hide her disappointment she stooped to pick up a

book which had slipped from her lap to the ground, and brushed the dry garden mould off it with much concern. As she did so she replied:

"That was very nice. Did he offer you a letter to any architect?"

Walter Kincaid had looked shrewdly at her during her minute's pretended occupation. A subdued twinkle came into his eyes, and he dropped them discreetly to the grass, as he waited for her to speak. When she did so, he replied evasively:

"Well, no, he didn't."

"Was that all?" Marion asked in some surprise.

"No, there was a little more," her companion said.

"Well?" Marion said with some impatience.

"He asked me if that was what I would like, and I said, 'First-rate.' He said, 'Better than anything?' and I said, 'Well, sir, if you come to that, I'd like to be an artist better than anything, but I don't believe there's room for more than one of those in a family, and I guess my sister's spoken first.'"

Marion's face showed an expressive light-

ening, but she did not speak; and Kincaid went on with his story:

"He wanted to know if it was a question of money, and I said it was and it wasn't. They didn't need any help from me at home, but I couldn't have any help from them; so there it was."

He paused again, and Marion asked:

"What else?"

Kincaid smoothed the grass softly back and forth with his hand. Marion saw that he liked to linger over his recital, and she was well pleased to humour him. At last he spoke:

"He said if I'd learn to chisel, and could pay my passage over, he knew a friend of his in Paris who'd take me into his studio and give me good wages for cutting his statues, and all the lessons I wanted besides."

"Will it take long to learn?" Marion asked, groping in the recesses of her mind for any forgotten scraps of information about stone-cutting.

"I guess that's about the best of it," Walter said joyously. "I know, now. Uncle George Kincaid's a stone mason, and I used to work with him odd times, ever since I

can remember. Kind of curious, aint it, the way things come around?"

To Marion's wider experience such a coincidence was not so curious as it appeared to her friend; and she passed lightly over his question, seizing the main fact eagerly, and saying:

"I am more than delighted."

Kincaid lifted his head, as if to meet her congratulation halfway. As his eyes caught hers, she saw the joy of the artist struggling with the sorrow of the man; and it came to her keenly how much she should miss this strong young soul out of her life. It was like Marion's unlikeness to other women that she should give this feeling fearless expression; in spite of the suspicion, fast crystallizing into certainty, that Walter Kincaid's admiration had crossed the danger line. She had always felt that affection and love were so separate from each other that to show the former, where the latter was impossible, softened the impending blow without misleading its victim. Yet she followed an intuition, rather than any course of reasoning, when she said:

"I shall miss you greatly."

The young man's face flushed with pleasure; yet he knew what was implied in Marion's willingness to express so much. His eyes searched hers for a moment, then fell, and his voice was almost sad as he said:

"I guess you will, some."

Marion gave a little sigh at the thought of that fate which hardly ever allows friendship between man and woman to be more than an inspiring possibility; but Walter Kincaid's gloom could not have even that relief which comes of the habit of generalization.

Marion broke the silence, which bade fair to become too eloquent, by saying:

"How do your people feel about it?"

Kincaid's mind had travelled far from his artistic career, and it was with some effort that he laid aside his last thought and took up again the one with which the talk had started.

"Father and Mother?" he said at last; a smile creeping into his eyes as he continued: "Oh, Father's so put about with Velma's going away that I guess there isn't room for another drop in the bucket. Mother keeps at him, telling him how Velma 'll be goin' over before long, and of course she can't go

alone; and when he says he doesn't see why we couldn't have gone into the mill, she says she doesn't see why he couldn't have gone to farming, same as *his* father did—and—well, mother'd keep even with anybody."

"And yet," Marion suggested, "your mother is the one who will miss you most."

Kincaid's mobile face sobered for a moment, then brightened as he said:

"That's about so; but you see it aint so hard for her other ways. She sees the sense of it, for one thing, and I guess her pride keeps her up."

"Yes," Marion said, half to herself, "that's the way with us women. For ourselves, it's the world well lost; but for a man we love——" She stopped, a little frightened at the face which was lifted to hers, its enthusiasm and intensity were so un-American. It hardly seemed as if it could be the one whose Yankee humour had a moment before dwelt lovingly on the picture of the bewildered ex-farmer, confronted with the old problem of the duckling in the hen-yard. She read the meaning of the face aright, but its immediate purpose was not quite what she feared; for what Walter said was:

"Miss Clayton, I want you should know you've done it all."

"Oh, no!" Marion said, with a recoil which was far from feigned; "I wrote to Mr. Mayhew, but that was a mere nothing."

"You were real good to do that, but it wasn't what I meant. Miss Clayton, you *know* what I mean."

Marion's eyes dropped before the expression in the ones raised to hers. She did know, and her heart did not refuse the thrill of pride which Walter Kincaid, blindly groping among feelings for whose complexity there had been nothing in his life to prepare him, longed that she should feel.

It was a supreme moment, and Marion tasted to the full the joy which is the birth-right of the inspirer, which yet could not be untouched by the woman's heritage of pain.

What might have followed it is impossible to say, for at this moment Marion's attention was arrested by a large, white object which seemed to be lurching through the orchard in her direction.

"What is it?" she said curiously, and a little fearfully, to her companion, who rose

to his feet and peered through the trees in the direction which she indicated.

"I guess it's Donald Keith and his canoe," he said after a minute.

Marion stood upon the garden seat, the better to command a view of the road.

"I see the canoe, but where is Donald?" she said after a minute.

"Oh, he's got it on his head," Walter said easily. "It isn't heavy," he added, as Marion gave an exclamation of dismay.

"I wish you would ask him to put it down and come here," she said, after watching for a few moments the unsteady advance of the curious combination of boy and boat.

Kincaid raised his hand to his mouth, with the intention of hailing Donald from where he stood, but thinking better of that method, ran down to the orchard wall, and waited at a spot which the boy must pass before striking into High Street.

"Look here, Don!" he said, stooping down to catch the young man's eye under the boat.

Young Keith stopped abruptly, and tilted the canoe so that his head was uncovered, resting the crossbar on his shoulder.

"Hullo!" he said, not in the most amiable tone. "What do you want?"

"I don't want anything; Miss Clayton asked me to call you; she wants you should come up."

"Oh!" Donald said, with a marked change of tone. He swung the canoe off his shoulders and laid it carefully on the wall; then examined his hands and person generally.

"I say—am I very dusty?"

"Well, some," Kincaid said with a broad smile; "but I don't believe anything short of a new suit of clothes would help you much, so you'd better come along."

Donald assented with a sigh. He was in that state of development where cleanliness takes precedence of godliness, and it hurt him sadly to go before his goddess of the hour in a state which could be a matter of indifference only to primitive man; but plainly there was no help for it, so furtively mopping his face, he strode on behind Walter.

Marion took suppressed delight in his discomfiture, which she felt sure was salutary, but spared him so far as not to offer him her hand.

"I'm afraid I have inconvenienced you

by my curiosity, but what were you doing with that canoe?" she said, smiling at him as he stood uncovered in the sunshine.

"Taking it down to my place. Some of those rascally boys"—warming with his subject—"have been using her. I wouldn't care so much, but they have scratched her from end to end."

"What a shame!" Marion exclaimed in real sympathy. "You cannot carry it all this distance every time you wish to go out."

"Oh, I can carry it well enough," he replied; "it's a bother, that's all. I just wish I'd caught them at it," he added wrathfully.

"I'm very glad you didn't," Marion said, "and if you keep on looking so bloodthirsty, I shall order Mr. Kincaid to put you in irons." And she glanced up at her stalwart admirer, who stood just behind the garden seat.

"I guess that'd be a pretty large order," Kincaid said, and Don added:

"Oh, I do not want to do any harm; only they shan't have a free ride again, that's all."

Marion looked thoughtful for a moment, and then said:

"Why can't you leave 'her' in my stable?"

"Oh, I say, Miss Clayton! that's a little too good in you."

"I don't see why," Marion said. "It's never used, and I should be really glad to have you keep the key."

Don glanced with involuntary approval at the situation of the stable, which would make it possible for him to combine safety for his dear boat with ease to himself, and, as Marion continued to urge his acceptance of her offer, he said at last:

"It's awfully good in you, and I'll do it if you'll promise to turn me out whenever I get to be a nuisance."

"It's a bargain," Marion said gaily, and, calling to the gardener, who was working at a little distance, she directed him to give the key of the stable to Mr. Keith.

Miss Clayton asked both young men to luncheon, but Donald could not humble himself enough to sit down with his hostess in his boating dress; and Mr. Kincaid, whose growing sense of the fitness of things taught him that his visit was properly over, steadily, if a little regretfully, declined the honour.

CHAPTER X.

It has not been altogether without significance that a chapter has been allowed to intervene between Marion's promise to Alice to think on the subject of their conversation and any record of its fulfilment. Thought, with Marion, was hardly that conscientious form of mental exercise practised by Miss Dempster, but was rather the slow development of already taken impressions, exposed, like the sensitive plate, to the quiet action of a well-tried medium.

A week after her promise to Alice she had practically no doubt on the subject of her duty, if, indeed, her swift sense of right can be expressed by so workaday a word. The inevitable implication in the Brookfield mind she knew that she must face, and that other misconception of her attitude toward virtue itself, was all that was left to trouble her.

It was at this stage that she felt, one July morning, an imperative need for an out-of-door day.

A love of the companionship of nature, which is quite distinct from a love of nature itself, was becoming instinctive with Marion, but she was only just learning to use it as a substitute for the solitude of a great city which is one of the first things missed by a novice entering country life. A visit to an old nurse was made the pretext for her excursion, which, on the strength of it, lasted all day. It was about half-past four, as she turned homeward from the pine grove where her afternoon had been spent. It had not been a hot day. What was known in Brookfield as the "river-breeze" was blowing freshly, bending the tall grass, and swinging the full-leaved branches of the trees. The summer no longer halted on any borderland of immaturity, but, lusty and strong, strode on to the consummation of its wishes; silent, except as it spoke through the determined hum of the myriads of insects, down among the grasses.

This strenuous life, following so quickly on the joyous recklessness of June, held, for

Marion, a suggestion of reproach. She asked herself what sustained effort, tending toward fruition, her life could show; and how much longer, like one of her own garden lilies, she could feel content to swing, lightly drinking in the sun and dew of heaven, only to scatter fragrance on the air.

The discouragement of such thoughts hastened fatigue, and she prudently decided to rest before going farther; sitting down on a broken bit of wall under the shade of a large maple. She had hardly begun to feel the good effects of her halt when her attention was caught by the quick roll of wheels, and a pair of spirited horses, harnessed to a light cart, dashed round the bend of the road. Their driver was Gould Whetmore, looking his usual well-appointed self, his face wearing an expression more in keeping with the day than any Marion had yet seen there. He might have passed without seeing her, but the horses, shying at her light dress, brought him almost face to face with her, by the width of their outward sweep. He pulled them in quickly, and sprang from his seat, uncovering his head to salute her, and still holding his hat in his hand when the salutation was over.

Marion remembered that this had been one of his many deferential ways, and she did not at once ask him to be covered, taking a woman's pleasure in the courtesy.

Gould Whetmore had a fine head, its correct modelling answering to the nice adjustment of his powers; and it was a head which well capped the strength and sweetness of a face whose expression had not been spoiled by the mockery that lurked in its less important lines. This seemed for the moment to be effaced, and replaced by a gaiety unrelated to his ordinary mood. He was too well-bred to examine Marion's person in detail, but it may be safely said that not a particle of her dainty freshness escaped him. Still less did the refined sweetness of her face and manner, whose quality he recognized as clearly superior to anything he had known in the years that had parted them; and which was enhanced tenfold by the absence from his present life of anything approaching it. Marion felt the pathos of this brighter mood, and took a step or two toward him, saying as she did so:

"What a lovely day it has been!"

"Yes," Mr Whetmore answered, "I be-

gin to see that it has. Have you been spending it here?" he asked.

"Part of it," she said, laughing. As she looked at him, her mind verified the impression renewed at their last meeting, and she knew that she believed in him. She took the last step toward him almost involuntarily, and put out her hand.

He held it for a moment in his cool, firm clasp, and said, as he relinquished it:

"I don't wish to presume upon your kindness, but are you going home, and will you let me drive you there?"

At this critical moment Marion did not fail to think of that sense of accountability mentioned in her promise to Miss Dempster. It crossed her mind that the Good Samaritan must have had a neighbourhood of his own, and that the Priest and Levite might have been labouring under a misconception in regard to the manner in which the wounded man in the parable had fallen among thieves. She knew that the value of her acceptance of Mr. Whetmore's invitation would be enhanced by promptness, and she made up her mind quickly, not to rob it of this grace; but he had time to say:

"You shall not be made to feel that you have established a precedent."

"Thank you," Marion said, smiling, "I accept."

Her companion tossed his soft hat to the seat of the cart, as if he could not bear to replace it at such a moment, laid the reins over the dasher, and helped Marion to her seat. His face radiated content, and as he gathered the reins in his hand and encouraged the horses to a light trot, he exclaimed:

"It *is* a charming day!"

At this moment they reached the entrance to the road leading to Marion's house, and Mr. Whetmore looked at her with a glance so comically entreating that she laughed outright; he touched his horses lightly with the whip, and they rounded the curve in the opposite direction at a sharp trot.

"Were you not going somewhere in particular?" Marion asked.

"I was driving for pleasure," Mr. Whetmore answered gravely. "My father particularly requested that I should do so, and I seldom refuse him anything."

Marion smiled, and then said:

"How is your father?"

"He does not seem to me to change much, though the doctor thinks he fails steadily."

"It must be a great pleasure to him to have you here," Marion continued rather tritely.

Her companion sighed.

"It would be a great deprivation not to have me, I suppose," he said. The lines of discouragement deepened in his face, but he smiled faintly.

"Poor father! He made his periodical apology to me for not dying this morning. When it comes to that, I go to the hotel for a few days."

"And you have rooms there?" asked Marion.

Mr. Whetmore assented and there was silence for a few moments. Marion had thought of a subject she wished to broach, and at first she doubted how best to do it, but finally took, as she usually did, the most direct way, by saying:

"I wish you would tell me about Donald Keith."

Mr. Whetmore gave a surprised and slightly disappointed look, and Marion answered it by saying:

"I think it is better that I should know the truth about him; it will make it easier for me to be his friend."

"Don is a good boy," Mr. Whetmore said with a slight hardening in his tone.

"He has his faults, I suppose," replied Marion.

"We are all miserable sinners," Mr. Whetmore answered with a light sneer.

Marion did not reply. She felt both hurt and annoyed, and was satisfied to let him feel the weight of her mood. That he did so was shown by his next words.

"I beg your pardon. I could not bear to think that you had succumbed to the Brookfield appetite for detail."

Marion made no direct reply, but said:

"I am sorry to be obliged to say I am a friend to Don, not to his good or bad actions. I am afraid I cannot make you understand why I think it better that I should know about them."

"I am greatly distressed that I should have misunderstood you. I ask you once more to pardon me."

The depth of self-reproach in his tone brought Marion's eyes to his face, out of

which had faded the mocking reflection of that spirit of denial by whose companionship this soul had been so long accursed. Instead, there lurked a subtle something, familiar to her as the image in her mirror, yet strange, too, from its masculine setting. The recognition of it lay warm about her heart, but it arrested the movement of the hand which it was her impulse to offer him in forgiveness. Yet he looked relieved, and began at once to speak:

"In a boy of twenty-two I define goodness as temperance, purity, and honour. Don is a shining example of all three; but what will you? He has a quick temper, an insatiable appetite for fun, and great lack of judgment."

Marion looked surprised, but she did not speak, and he continued:

"He showed his lack of judgment in the choice of his college friends. There was only one really bad fellow among them, but they were all light-weights, and careless about things Don values. He found that out at the final escapade."

"Tell me about it," Marion said, knowing that this must be the occurrence of which Florry had spoken.

"It was the night before the Fourth of July; the Keiths were away, and those boys took it into their heads to make a punch, like the one Mr. Keith had made for them the year before. You can imagine what sort of likeness there was. They all drank copiously, except Donald, who was under some sort of promise to his mother. He tried to lock them in, but they broke a few windows and let themselves out; so he went with them to keep them out of mischief. Of course, he should have handed them over to the police long before they reached the girl's house—you know about that?"

Marion nodded.

"And Don was quite himself?"

"I saw him half an hour afterward and can swear to his sobriety at any time that evening."

"What an unfortunate business!" exclaimed Marion involuntarily.

"I'm afraid I don't agree with you there," Mr. Whetmore said. "Those boys were gentlemen, and they have had a most salutary warning. As to the breaking of the engagement, which you, as a woman, are bound to regret, I regard that as a piece of good

fortune for them both. They ought to have half a dozen love affairs apiece, before any one of them becomes permanent. Besides, she is not the girl for Don."

"I'm not sure of that," Marion said stoutly.

"Oh, if it comes to that, neither am I; but she wrote him a most ill-advised letter."

"That was under pressure."

"Worse and worse," Mr. Whetmore affirmed. "You add certainty to my conviction."

Marion smiled, but did not pursue her defence, and Mr. Whetmore closed the subject by saying:

"Don announced his intention of going at once to the bad, and I have made it my business ever since to delude him into the belief that he is doing so; but I will say to you in confidence that you never in your life knew a cleaner, more straightforward boy. Even I cannot corrupt him."

"He must be virtuous, indeed!" Marion said, and they both laughed and dropped the subject by common consent.

Marion had paid little attention to the direction of their drive. She knew that Mr.

Whetmore would have the discretion not to prolong it beyond a certain point; and, in fact, he turned upon the home stretch just as their talk about Don ended. They had gone some distance on their return when he said:

"Would it be indiscreet to ask how your Brookfield experiment has prospered?" It was so long before Marion spoke that he continued:

"Perhaps the indiscretion might be in your replying."

"It might be in the nature of it," she said, smiling; and, in fact, she had never confronted herself with just this question, in which truth to herself and loyalty to Brookfield jostled each other a little too closely.

"Your silence speaks for you," he said, with a suspicion of mockery in his faintly smiling eyes.

"It does not speak fairly, then," Marion replied, finding her tongue to some purpose. "I had not thought of my being here as an experiment; that is a word no woman would use about a part of her life. I was trying to look at it from your point of view."

"Now, Heaven forfend!" ejaculated Mr. Whetmore.

"It has," Marion said, laughing. "I can't do it. The truth is," she went on soberly, "Brookfield interests and amuses me; and if there are some things which I have expected, and haven't found, on the other hand I have found a good many for which I was not prepared." She stopped abruptly, and asked:

"Is that enough?"

"Not if there is any more," her companion answered promptly.

Here the horses left the wood road, up which they had been climbing, and brought the drivers out at the top of the hill, from which could be seen the sunset, glowing down on the meadows from a gap in the line of hills. Mr. Whetmore checked the horses, and there was silence for a moment. Then Marion said:

"There are disappointments everywhere, but it seems to me that they are easier to bear in the country, the compensations are so obvious."

"A little too obvious," Mr. Whetmore answered, his eyes still resting upon the prospect before him. "It seems like impiety to disregard them."

"You speak," she said, "as if you were not as true a creation as the mountains."

"It is a creation in which I have been permitted to take a hand. Can I say more?"

Marion was silent. She was surprised to find how, in spite of her added years, and increased dexterity, she still had, in talking with this man, the feeling of having strayed into a labyrinth where she must constantly stop to feel for her clew. After a minute or two she said simply:

"I'm afraid you are very much bored here."

"Oh, yes!" Mr. Whetmore responded; "but I have the advantage of you in one respect. I never entertained what I suppose to have been your hopes in regard to the life here." He stopped a minute, and looked keenly at her averted face. "On the other hand," he went on, "I cannot be so pleasantly surprised at my compensations, some of which, I take it, you have found."

They were turning into the driveway as he spoke, and Marion felt the arrival at home to be opportune. She waited before replying until Mr. Whetmore had checked his horses at the porch:

"I knew a man once who used to say that I had a genius for surprises, but I think he meant for giving, not receiving, them."

"I dare say he did," Mr. Whetmore said, laughing, as he helped her to get down; and he carried away a charming picture of his companion, framed in the perfect setting of her vine-wreathed porch.

As Marion had approached the house a flutter of white drapery among the chairs on the veranda suggested the presence of a visitor, and, after bidding Mr. Whetmore good-bye, she turned toward the parlour. At one of the long windows stood Kitty Frazer, her face brightened by the prospect of their meeting. Of this feeling Marion made a warm return. She almost forgot her fatigue, and exclaimed brightly:

"My dear, what a pleasure to see you!"

Kitty's response was not in words, but her face and manner showed the almost painful struggle of reticence with enthusiasm which marked the strength and sweetness of a nature untrained except through inheritance. She returned Marion's embrace, and said:

"I didn't see how I could go away without seeing you."

Something in her tone gave Miss Clayton quick insight into the impulse which had brought her there; she drew her down beside her on a couch, and said:

"I am so sorry that you should have been annoyed by supposing that I had gossiped about you."

The ungoverned young blood sprang to Kitty's face, and then swept back to her heart, leaving her white to the lips. Her thought seemed struggling to express itself, through her eyes, her parted lips, even the strong young finger-tips closing on the card-case and handkerchief lying in her lap. Without these aids to expression the words would have been pitifully inadequate, but Marion divined at once that they carried the weight of Kitty's sorrow, borne in silence through those long months, since Don's desertion.

"I came about that—I didn't want you to think—I wanted you to know—oh, Miss Marion" (the words came now in a freer flow)! "Alice saw me crying; but it wasn't what she thought; not because I was vexed; I loved you for it;" and as Marion looked earnestly into the distressed face she went on:

"I wanted you to be on Don's side; I want him to be right. Don't you see?"

Marion did see, and she gathered Kitty into her arms, laying the shapely little head in her lap, and smoothing it, with soft words of endearment, waiting for the tears to pass.

They could not last long in one so little used to the indulgence of grief, and Kitty soon sat up and dried her eyes. Her reserve with Marion was quite broken down, and she spoke freely:

"When Don asked me to marry him, we talked about it—I mean his ways. He said I would have to be patient, and he gave me his word of honour he wouldn't do anything I would really be ashamed of. Those weren't nice boys he went with, but I know he didn't do the things they did, except that once. You don't think I ought to have written to him the way I did, do you, Miss Marion?"

"I don't think I know quite how you wrote to him," said Marion.

Kitty's voice fell in the telling; the horror of it was still fresh to her.

"I said he need never come to see me again unless he gave up all that set and

promised me never to touch a drop of wine again as long as he lived."

At another time Marion could have smiled at the tenour of this rebuke, suggesting as it did the perpetual childhood of Florry Burnett; but the effect had been too tragic not to throw its seriousness over the cause. She felt greatly at a loss how best to satisfy Kitty's craving for sympathy for Don, without ministering to the morbid spirit of self-accusation which was making the girl ready to exalt her lover into a hero, on whose head she herself had set the martyr's crown.

"Dear Kitty," she said at last, "I love both you and Don, and I think you were both right and both wrong. There is one thing I am going to tell you, but you must promise not to use it to make yourself more miserable."

Kitty squeezed her hand in silence, and she went on:

"I have reason to feel sure that Don had not been drinking that evening," and as Kitty looked quite dazed, she explained:

"He went to your house with the young men to try to keep them from annoying you; but, my dear girl, one of his best friends

thinks that he was greatly to blame for the whole affair—as much, perhaps more, than if he had been drinking.”

It was hard to say just what effect this disclosure had upon Kitty, so quickly did her exterior reticence close upon the life within; but Marion rightly guessed that it was neither wholly consoling nor disheartening. After a few minutes Miss Clayton said:

“Do you remember the verse we used to write in albums when we were children—

“If you love me, as I love you,
No knife shall cut our love in two?”

And as Kitty smiled a little drearily: “We will suppose that your letter was the knife. No doubt it ~~hurt~~ Don horribly, but——”

“Oh, but, Miss Clayton,” Kitty interrupted, “it isn’t that, but look at the way he goes on. I drove him to it; it is all my fault; that was why I loved you so for saying what you did.”

Marion smiled to herself, but outwardly she was grave.

“Don hasn’t done anything very desperate yet,” she said.

Kitty was silent, but plainly some thought

was working to the surface. At last she said shyly:

"Do you like Mr. Whetmore?"

"Very much," Marion replied.

"You don't think——" Kitty began; then stopped, embarrassed.

"No," Marion said, smiling, "I don't. But I don't wish to impose my belief on you," she added; "only I think you may feel quite safe about Don. Mr. Whetmore assures me that, in spite of appearances, he is behaving himself very well."

Kitty drank in this information eagerly for the moment, regardless of its source. She rose reluctantly to go, saying that her mother would be worried about her, and Marion did not urge her to stay, feeling that she herself needed rest, after the excitements of the day.

CHAPTER XI.

A FEW days after the events detailed in the last chapter there occurred a meeting of what was known in Brookfield as "The Ladies' Benevolent." The ostensible purpose of this society was that of furnishing garments to needy missionaries (the poor of Brookfield had been hunted down and exterminated long before the date of this story), and the meetings were usually held in the Congregational Church parlours; but as these were undergoing repairs, Mrs. Robert Burnett had offered her house as a substitute.

The house was one of those old-fashioned ones described in the town records as "mansions." It had a small, square hall, into the back of which the staircase had been skilfully fitted; a large room on either side; and behind these and the massive chimney a dining room and bedroom. It had been Florry's first care, on coming into power, to remodel the

house. The hall had been converted into a coat closet; its stairs, with their curiously carved balustrade, and the wainscot, going to kindle the kitchen fire. A new hall was made out of the old dining room, which in its turn moved on into the bedroom that Mr. and Mrs. Burnett had occupied since their marriage, but which they were now called upon to resign.

The parlour had undergone a transformation which would have made it unrecognizable by its old friends if it had not been allowed to keep its own situation in the house. There, too, the wainscotting had been displaced, and a dark paper of olive-green, heavily charged with gold, went down to the base-boards. These were painted dark-red, as was the old mantel, above which rose, tier after tier, a set of shelves, which held enough bric-à-brac to furnish a bargain counter. Heavy chenille curtains half screened the small windows, and completed the sombre effect of the whole.

The greatest triumph had been reached in the furniture, which was all upholstery, but the less said about the pictures the better. Even Florry apologized for them, explaining

that the spaces were so big, and her money was nearly used up.

To Miss Burnett this room was a shrine worthy of the patron saint of propriety herself, and she felt sorry to desecrate it by the admission of the common herd, some of whom, unfortunately, belonged to the Church, and so to its societies.

"If this room gets too full, you can take old Mrs. Cameron and the Miss Doughtys, and some of those people, into the sitting room," Florry said to her mother, who was helping her to arrange the parlour just before the meeting.

"I am afraid it may be warm in the sitting room; you know the afternoon sun lays there," Mrs. Burnett replied.

"I guess they can stand it," Florry said easily. There was silence for a time, till, looking out of the window, she caught sight of Mrs. Clapp coming down the street, casting about her the usual distrustful glances, as if she suspected the very herbage of harbouring secrets of its own.

"There's Aunt Susan," Florry said.

Mrs. Clapp's brisk walk, which yielded so little to the power of age, had by this time

brought her to the gate, from which she passed nimbly up the path to the front door. Here she was greeted by her niece:

"Well, Auntie, you've come early enough."

"I guess you'd have come early if you'd left things the way I have. Your uncle's at home sick," in answer to Florry's questioning glance. "He's shut the windows and opened the blinds—and there he sits. I said to him, 'Well, 'Lias Clapp, if you're bound to be sunstruck in your own house, I'll wash my hands of it,' and I just came right along."

"Has 'Lias anything serious the matter with him?" asked Mrs. Burnett.

"I guess not, unless it's softening of the brain," answered Mrs. Clapp grimly.

Her bonnet was by this time laid aside, her cap adjusted, and she was in the act of taking out her knitting, for Mrs. Clapp's solicitude for missions always took the form of bed-shoes or baby socks.

"Any news, Auntie?" Florry asked politely, after her mother and aunt were seated.

"Well, not anything great," Mrs. Clapp replied modestly, relieving herself, however, of several bits of information, the relation of

which was hardly over before steps were again heard on the walk, and Florry had welcomed her aunt Letty Frazer, who came into the parlour in her usual flutter of ribbons and laces.

She greeted her sisters with real affection, tinged, in the case of Mrs. Clapp, with a timidity which dated back to those days when Susan had formed the habit of calling her "that baby."

"It's a warm day," she said weakly.

"You don't say!" said Mrs. Clapp, changing needles.

"Are you about as usual at your house?" asked Mrs. Burnett.

"Oh, yes, about," Mrs. Frazer responded, pulling at the lace ruffles in her sleeves, while Mrs. Clapp poured a whole volley of sharp glances after the feebly fugitive shade of meaning in her tone.

"Hasn't Kitty stopped fretting after that young scamp yet?" she asked; but just here the society began to arrive *en masse*, and Mrs. Frazer made good her escape.

It would not have been according to Mrs. Clapp's ideas, either of thrift or politeness, not to make a circuit of the room; there was

no telling what choice bits might lie in unexpected corners; but she soon returned to the window where Mrs. Burnett sat firmly entrenched behind piles of unfinished garments, and supported by the chosen few who formed what might be called the fountain-head of local information. As Mrs. Clapp seated herself, one of these ladies was saying:

"He lives right on there, side by side, as you may say, with her husband."

"I never heard of such doings!" exclaimed a large pink-faced woman, flushed to a deeper tint either by the story or by her unaccustomed struggles with unbleached muslin, between which and missionary ardour there seems to be some mysterious link.

"In my opinion," Mrs. Burnett began weightily, "we cannot feel too thankful for the high standard maintained by our young people in regard to such matters."

At this moment one of the outlying workers came up for a fresh garment, and lingered over her choice to catch the drift of the conversation. Mrs. Burnett was not averse to having a fresh listener. She was in the exclusive possession of a bit of news, and her enjoyment in feeling that she owned it was

enhanced by the knowledge that Mrs. Clapp did not. She continued sententiously:

"And I think it is matter for regret that Marion Clayton seems determined to pursue her own pleasure, quite regardless of it."

This suggestive beginning was hailed with inarticulate murmurs of curiosity by everyone but Mrs. Clapp, who was resolved to preserve her dignity at any cost but that of losing the story.

"I suppose she is just as intimate with Kincaid," suggested the pink-faced matron.

"As to that, I cannot say," replied Mrs. Burnett, dealing out her information slowly, for fear of cheapening its value; "but I know she is with Gould Whetmore."

"You don't say!" exclaimed a fresh voice from the edge of the circle.

"She had been to Snappit with him last Thursday, and that is a long step to take, unless she's seen him pretty often."

"Was she 'way over to Snappit?" asked a voice whose owner represented that spirit of envy which so often opens the door to doubt.

Florry had, by this time, brought her work, and was sitting in the ring, and she answered promptly:

"She was on the road home, and I don't suppose anybody's going to believe that he'd driven her out the River Road and back; so, of course, they'd been 'round Talcottville, and that's a four hours' ride, any time."

To this reasoning the majority gave a pleased murmur of assent, but Aunt Susan said:

"Well, I don't know but what, while she was about it, she might as well drive long enough. There'll be plenty of talk, anyway, and folks say those Whetmore horses are the best in town." For Marion's independence had struck an answering chord in Mrs. Clapp's heart.

But Florry, angry at the insinuation contained in her aunt's words, replied with some heat:

"I guess most of the talk will be down on High Street, Auntie, and you might as well stop it, while you're about it."

Mrs. Clapp's immobile face took no account of her niece's repartee, to which she apparently disdained to reply; while Florry, conscious of having gone too far, sat silent too, with a face like an embarrassed turkey-cock.

Mrs. Burnett had been giving out work, and so had missed this passage-at-arms; now she brought the talk back to the main question by saying:

"I am afraid Marion's reputation will suffer if she allows her name to be connected with Gould Whetmore's."

"Perhaps," suggested the soft-voiced little lady who once before has represented the minority in these pages, "Mr. Whetmore may be going to turn over a new leaf."

"Sho!" said Mrs. Clapp; and a fresh voice added:

"I guess it wouldn't be much use if he did, after the way he's gone on."

"I'd just like to know what Mrs. Farraday thinks of all this," Mrs. Clapp said, her eyes snapping in time with the sharp click of her needles; "I guess it puts her nose pretty well out of joint."

"Well, for my part," said the soft-voiced little person, "I think we should give such people the benefit of the doubt."

"If there is any," Florry said, laughing noisily.

"There seems to have been some when it came to Nat Beardsly," said the stout lady,

who had herself a son inclined to be wild. Gossip, not without the complicity of Miss Burnett, had lately been busy with his name; and his mother took one step on the road to revenge when she alluded to the shortcomings of Mr. Beardsly, who was an admitted beau of Florry's.

Miss Burnett did not reply in his defence, but her mother said:

"Whatever Nathaniel has done in the past, his life in Brookfield has been most correct, and I don't think we need go farther back than that; especially when he has become a member of the Church, and is so actively engaged in good works."

During this speech Aunt Letty had approached the circle, on the outside of which she fluttered irresolutely. Mrs. Frazer was famous for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time, and it was most characteristic of her to remark now:

"That may all be true, Sarah, but I know Don used to say that Nat Beardsly's language was shocking, especially when he talked about the girls in town. Of course, that was when he felt perfectly safe."

"I guess he felt safe enough with Don,"

Mrs. Clapp replied, thrusting her knitting into her bag. She looked around on the ladies, who, having made preparations to go, were waiting for some last word to be said. "All I can say is, Marion Clayton had better look out. It's easier to go down than to get up."

There was wagging of heads and a unanimous sigh at this utterance of the Oracle, but Florry's good nature prevailed for the moment, and she said:

"Oh, come now, Aunt Susan! that's a little too much."

CHAPTER XII.

FROM the time when Marion offered her stable as a hiding place for Don's canoe her acquaintance with him had grown apace. Don bought a new boating suit, and seldom failed to stop at Meadowview either before or after a paddle. He gave to Marion that species of adoration which is always in a boy's heart, waiting for bestowal on some woman a few years his senior; and on the altar of his devotion he laid his youthful egotism, pouring out before his idol his opinions on every subject, human and divine, as the most acceptable of offerings. Yet beyond an occasional bitter reference to his ostracism by the town, he had never touched on the main points of his quarrel with it, until an afternoon in August, about three weeks after Miss Clayton's interview with him in the garden. His mood on this occasion was sentimental, and he apostrophized her kindness in taking him in with somewhat exaggerated fervour.

"Upon my soul, I didn't have a place to go to!"

"How about Braddock's?" asked Marion mischievously.

"Now, Miss Clayton, you don't pretend to suppose I like that sort of thing."

"When I first saw you there, it certainly seemed to me that you liked some of the persons who liked it."

Don's face flushed darkly. He had never been able to bear, from Marion, any allusion to his intimacy with Julia. After a moody silence he said:

"A fellow can't stay forever at home, and I give you my word I hadn't another decent place to go after Kitty threw me over."

"After what?" asked Marion meaningly.

"After Kitty threw me over," Don repeated stolidly.

Marion was lounging in a deep window seat, and she raised her hand to push open the closed blinds, letting in the light on Donald's face; her own remained in shadow.

"I beg your pardon," she said gravely. "I was under the impression that you threw her over."

Don sprang to his feet.

"I say, Miss Clayton, do I look like a fellow who would jilt a girl?"

"No, you do not," Marion replied candidly; but she added nothing more, and Don began to pace the floor, his wrath manifestly rising with every step.

"It's very evident where your sympathies are," he fumed, "but I can tell you you have been confoundedly prejudiced. No man with a rag of self-respect would ever have gone back to that house."

"Was it altogether self-respect, Don?" Marion asked gently, and as he answered hotly, "Yes it was," she added: "My informant acquitted you quite as fully as you could wish."

"You needn't try to persuade me that she's sorry," he answered, turning from her in his angry walk.

Marion waited until he came opposite to her again, and then said:

"My dear Don, I wish you would stand still a minute."

He planted himself in front of her, glowering at a spot just over her head.

"Let us suppose that it is all as you say; that you behaved, on that occasion, just as

you ought; that you have been the subject of unjust suspicion. Wasn't there anything before that which laid you open to misconception? Wasn't there any patience which you were bound to return? Don, you can't pretend there wasn't!"

The boy's face hardened at the gentle insistence of this appeal. At the end he thrust his hands into his pockets and answered stoutly:

"No, I can't pretend, and that's the truth. If I had been willing to whine about my sins, and eat a lot of humble pie that didn't belong to me, I'd be solid with Brookfield now, I dare say; but I wouldn't then, and I won't now. If you like that kind of thing, too, I guess I'd better take myself off." And as he snatched his cap from the table and made for the door, he fired the parting shot by saying:

"There are plenty of places where a fellow can be honest, if he isn't anything else."

During this scene Marion had kept quite still, making no attempt to stem the torrent, swollen as well with the sticks and straws of their argument as with the bitter waters which had gone over Don's soul; but after

the door had closed with an angry bang she rose quickly to her feet.

"Where had Don gone?" To perdition this time, without doubt; but Marion's experience failed to give her the clew to the location of that spot within the borders of Brookfield. That she had sent him there was the obvious fact, the thought of which quickened her pulses, as it did the steps in which she sought to ease the burden of her thoughts. She invoked the offices of Don's Guardian Angel, while, like a true daughter of the century, she considered the wisdom of sending a note to Gould Whetmore, as to a most certain deputy of that problematical celestial guide. In fine, she had no appetite for the dainty supper which had been prepared for herself and Don, and stayed in the library to bemoan her interference, while listlessly turning the pages of a new magazine.

About eight o'clock, as she was beginning to own herself hungry in spite of her undiminished anxiety, there was a quick step on the porch and a determined rap on the door. As Marion rose to admit her visitor, the door was flung open and Donald, impetuous yet abashed, stood on the thresh-

old. Marion was quite beyond the possibility of hiding her joy, and she welcomed her prodigal with outstretched hands; exclaiming, however, as she did so:

"Oh, Don! you distressed me inexpressibly."

"I know it," Don said, holding her soft hands in a light, unconscious grasp, and as Marion relented again, saying: "But I did very wrong to provoke you so," he said: "Look here, Miss Clayton, I'm a cad; a mean blackguardly cad! I'm not fit to sole your shoes, or Kitty's either, and I want you to know that I know it."

Marion could have laughed for joy over Don's change of heart and with amusement at his expression of it, but she thought it wiser to refrain.

"Dear Don," she said, "you shall be anything you say, if you will only sit down and have supper with me."

It was a merry meal and followed by a pleasant hour, but before Don went away he said:

"Miss Clayton, I mean to tell Kitty what I told you, the first time I get a chance." And Marion nodded her approval.

Don's chance came soon. Three days after the events just detailed, Marion had a severe nervous headache. Kitty, who had come to spend the day, welcomed the chance of being of use, and spent the morning on her knees beside Marion's couch, trying to charm away the pain by the pressure of her cool, firm fingers. At luncheon time Miss Clayton was enough better to take a cup of tea, and afterward dropped into a sleep. Kitty took the tray in her hands and stole into the hall, and down the stairs, on her way to the dining room. Thinking she heard voices, she paused on the last landing of the stairs, and looking down, saw Don in earnest conversation with Mary. Her irresolution saved her from the ignominy of flight and she continued on her way, reaching the floor of the hall just as Donald was saying:

"All right, I'm glad to hear it isn't anything worse. I think I'll come in and read a bit."

Turning suddenly toward the library, he encountered Kitty, who, under cover of the shaded interior, was about to escape his notice. Mary had disappeared by another door and they were alone. Kitty's blushes

had had time to gather and fade before she had been seen by Don, and her embarrassment was in the second stage of cold whiteness which came as if at the bidding of an icy hand laid upon her heart. Don, on the other hand, was red as fire, and so completely lost was his usual self-possession that Kitty had almost crossed the room before he sprang forward to relieve her of the tray.

Hastily setting the dishes on a table, he faced her, and said, with the dignity of real purpose:

"Will you please wait a minute, Kitty? I want to speak to you."

Kitty waited trembling, and praying earnestly to herself, in her simple fashion, for strength to bear her part well.

Don's performance of his was hardly what might have been hoped from the frequency of its rehearsal. In the relations of his short life he had not often been the one to humiliate himself, and with his sudden access of will there had not come a corresponding ability.

"Look here, Kitty," he began; "I want to have you to know that I think you did just what was right—I mean, I think I deserved

it, even if I hadn't done just what you thought. I felt awfully cut up about the letter, but I hadn't any business to act the way I did. It was all right—what you did, I mean—but if it hadn't been, I oughtn't to have behaved the way I did. I was a cad, a beastly cad"—warming with his subject—"and you are an angel, Kitty. I don't ask you to take me back; no," as Kitty made a slight movement, "that wouldn't be right, I don't deserve it."

It cannot be denied that Don felt some admiration for his own magnanimity; and the firm pressure of his foot upon this rock re-established his usual boldness, so that he waited with some dignity for Kitty's reply.

Donald's confusion at the outset had steadied her somewhat, and the colour had returned to her face, but she spoke timidly, though a careful ear might have detected the undercurrent of resolution which flowed steadily over the bed-rock of Kitty's character.

"I don't know but you are right, Don—I mean about your being wrong. I suppose it wasn't very kind to leave me that way"—her eyes filled with the sweet tears of self-

pity. Donald's hand closed firmly on his riding whip, as she lifted her face to his.

"But, Don," she went on, "I oughtn't to have written to you so. It would have all come right if I had waited a little, and so really I think it was mostly my fault. Oh, Don, I want to think so!" and the tears fell.

Don's resolution was not proof against these words so touchingly enforced. Putting his arm around her, he drew her toward the sofa, seating himself beside her, and then honourably removing his arm while he held one of her hands fast with his.

"Of course," he said, speaking as it were above the tumult of his heart, "things cannot be as they were; at least not just yet," feeling Kitty's hand grow cold in his. "I shouldn't expect anything more than this," giving the hand an added pressure. "But if you'll let me come to see you sometimes, if you'll try me, Kitty——"

He stopped abruptly, and Kitty, looking up to him with trembling, tear-stained face, said pathetically:

"Oh, Don!"

And Don stooped and kissed her.

Some hint of what was going on below

must have reached Miss Clayton in her dreams, for she waked suddenly, her headache gone, and with an irresistible wish to go down stairs. She threw a shawl over her shoulders and came languidly through the hall, guided to the library by the sound of voices. At the sight of the reunion of these two young people, so dear to her, joy filled her heart and overflowed in her voice as she said:

“ Won’t you kiss me, too? ”

The lovers looked startled, then relieved. They both rose and Kitty, with her sweet literalness, embraced Marion warmly, and as Don took her outstretched hand, he said:

“ May I? ”

And receiving full permission from her eyes, he stooped and kissed her too.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE month which followed the events just described was, to Marion, one of halcyon days. The ideal Brookfield seemed almost to have materialized, and she herself to be on the point of realizing the Brookfield ideal. She read and drove with Alice, took tea with the aunties, and went to church sociables and thimble parties almost to satiety. But even for the most favoured mortal such periods must be brief and, in Brookfield, Marion was not the most favoured mortal. Also it is not given to any man to serve two masters, and her fine show of loyalty to the town could not relieve her from the suspicion of giving aid and comfort to the enemy. So long as Donald and his canoe could be seen almost daily going and coming between the Clayton stable and the river; so long as Walter Kincaid was known to talk over his Paris plans every few

days in the Clayton homestead; above all, so long as Gould Whetmore was received by Marion on terms of intimate acquaintance, peace between her and the town could be at best but a truce.

Although she was partly unconscious of it, much of her satisfaction with her Brookfield life during this period came from her growing intimacy with Gould Whetmore. His visits to her had become more frequent than even Brookfield had had the wit to suspect, and he had almost ceased to protest against her kindness in receiving him.

It was perhaps this last circumstance which caused her to date the beginning of certain real troubles growing out of her Brookfield life from a visit paid by him late in August, when he again opened the subject.

Marion had been driving with Alice, and Mr. Whetmore's name was brought to her just as she had changed her driving dress for a soft, dull silk.

Either Marion's country life or some subtle influence which had combined with it had given her face and figure added charm. Angles had become outlines, and there was a new depth of colour, a richer vitality, which

seemed to transform her feminine charm into something more womanly yet not the less girlish. As she came down the broad stairway, attended by her floating draperies and clothed in that sweet seriousness which was the complement of her admirable lightness, it seemed as if she had gathered up all the traditional quality of those who had preceded her in the charming old house of which she had come to be the mistress.

Something of this thought was in Gould Whetmore's mind as he stood among the shadows of the dimly lighted parlour and watched her descent. It was in this room that Marion had always received him. A fine instinct which divined, while it hardly glanced at, the possibilities between them, had advised her to observe so much of formality in her reception of him. On his part there was no rebellion against a conventionality which all the traditions of his life led him to respect, and he had a keen appreciation of the almost imperceptible stages by which she lessened the distance between them.

As she came toward him she held in one hand a bunch of exquisite June roses, and with the other she gave him the welcome of

which no fashion should be allowed to deprive a friend.

"Yes," she said, glancing at the flowers, in response to his exclamation of surprise. "It is one of the triumphs of the gardener. I am going to ask you to take them to your father. I am sure they will interest him."

"You are very kind," Mr. Whetmore responded, his face brightening like a mother's at thoughtful mention of her child. "But he will be sorry to deprive you of them."

"Oh, I have had my share!" Marion said brightly. "And, to tell you the truth, I don't care very much for anything out of season."

"You are the favourite of fortune, but we Whetmores inherit perverted tastes."

"More highly cultivated, perhaps," Marion said, seating herself in a low chair beside the table which held the lamp.

"Perhaps!" her companion replied, with gentle sarcasm.

Marion drew her embroidery bag toward her, and began to put it in order in a leisurely way. She saw that Mr. Whetmore was not in his happiest mood, so she kept quiet for a few moments, and then said:

"How is your father?"

"Just now he is suffering from an imprudence which he ventured upon in my absence, but that shows that I am of some use here, after all."

"Have you been away?" Marion asked in some surprise, which might have served to show her how closely she had come to keep track of her visitor's movements.

"Yes," Mr. Whetmore answered bitterly. "I went down for two days, to wind up my connection with the Grahams."

"Oh, I am so sorry!" Marion exclaimed sympathetically; "I had hoped that that need not be one of your renunciations."

"You are very kind to call them so."

"I do not see what else they could be called."

"Brookfield could tell you," Mr. Whetmore replied, and he added, "my father makes me ample compensation for anything I have lost."

"I suppose you mean money," Marion said with fine scorn. "Can he compensate you for your career, for your place in the world?"

"You must make allowance for the way such things are regarded. I assure you that

it is not only in Brookfield that I am suspected of shirking a disagreeable duty, to live in idleness on my father's money."

"No one has ever said so to me." Marion worked silently for a few minutes after this protest, while the force of Mr. Whetmore's reasoning made its inevitable way into her mind. She sighed, and then smiled and said:

"I am sorry that that must be one of your renunciations."

Mr. Whetmore's face softened as he looked at her.

"You have a most dangerous gift," he said, and as he said it he smiled.

Marion was gratified, but she was far too adroit to let her companion dwell on this theme, and they were soon talking over old friends and new books and all the kindred interests of two persons of the world. They had several times flown far and returned safely before some reference to Marion's first winter in New York led Mr. Whetmore to speak of Mrs. Clayton.

In talking about her mother Marion was usually reticent, but not with Gould Whetmore. She felt sure of his comprehension;

indeed, this assurance illuminated all their intercourse. Some of her most promising friendships were marred by the care with which she had to avoid possible pitfalls, but none could be hidden in this clear, but not too intense light.

"I often wished to tell you," Mr. Whetmore said, "what a marked influence your mother had upon my life."

Marion gave an exclamation of surprise. "My mother's influence was always wider than I dreamed, but I should have supposed that you were too much the 'young man about town' to have fallen under it."

"There were special circumstances, of course," Mr. Whetmore replied (Marion did not ask what these were), "and I did not at the time understand that I was being influenced, or I should probably have resisted successfully. The Whetmores are heirs to the ages, but your mother gave me an idea of a finer sort of inheritance. It was a matter of personality," he added.

Marion sighed: "I am very glad; since her death I have come to know how many lives she touched."

It is doubtful if Mr. Whetmore heard. He

was looking intently at the head bent over her embroidery.

"You are very like her," he said almost involuntarily.

"Oh, no!" Marion exclaimed, looking up quickly. She seemed shocked, as at some profanation. "I am so much more self-conscious. I copy her, but she was only herself. It was a gift, like genius or inspiration."

"You are of your age," Mr. Whetmore said shortly. He seemed preoccupied, and Marion felt embarrassed by the directness of his look. She took refuge in her embroidery, and worked steadily for a few minutes.

Presently he said abruptly:

"There is something I wish to say to you."

Marion's pulses gave a quick beat, though not with the ordinary apprehension of a woman at such a declaration; for there was no suggestion of passion in Mr. Whetmore's tone. But Marion's spiritual senses were naturally keen and sharpened by use, and she understood now, with painful clearness, that Mr. Whetmore wished to open a subject which she had hoped resolutely to close. Her mental protest was involuntary, but she

did not suppose that her companion had detected it.

"You would rather not hear it."

He took up a small Japanese box from the table, and began to turn it over nervously. "This is genuine gold-lacquer work," he said after a minute.

"Yes," Marion answered; "it was brought over by my sea-faring uncle. We have some larger pieces." As she spoke she resolutely folded her embroidery and replaced it in the bag, pushing that away from her across the table. Mr. Whetmore laid down the box with a sigh.

"I am really very sorry, but I am afraid I must ask you to let me speak."

Marion smiled slightly. "Your requests are made in the masculine gender. Go on, please!"

"It is somewhat in the nature of a debt of honour, though I may be fanciful," Mr. Whetmore said.

Marion saw that he was genuinely embarrassed, and the perception of it restored her poise. It crossed her mind that the most difficult situation for a man of the world is that in which he is most in earnest. To a

man like Walter Kincaid such a moment would be fraught with great possibilities, while everywhere else Mr. Whetmore would have him at the extremest disadvantage. While she reflected Mr. Whetmore began to speak, and as he proceeded she felt that she had done him some injustice, for he spoke with unmistakable dignity.

"When you came here I was at a most unpleasant crisis in my life. You need not have been afraid that I should annoy you with details." Marion's eyes fell, as if she had been convicted of indelicacy. "I need not tell you the value I set on Brookfield opinion, but no man likes to be ostracised. My friends were out of reach, and my home was hardly a refuge from any sort of unpleasantness." He raised his hand to shield his face from the light, but Marion saw that every cynical line was in its place. "To be brief, I had determined to sell my birthright. I don't connect myself for a moment with the original perpetrator of that act. His was a natural want, and he took natural measures of relief. My trouble was wholly artificial, and I proposed to myself an artificial remedy. It would have ruined my whole life, and my

father's if he had known it (though I promised myself that that should not happen), and I cannot say what effect it would have had further; no good one, I am sure." He stopped abruptly, and Marion glowed under the unconsciously steady look with which he regarded her.

"Just then you came," he said finally.

"I do not see the connection," Marion replied sincerely.

"Do you not?" her companion said. "I understood the worth of my birthright when I saw what it was to be treated as your peer."

Marion did not speak. She was not a woman to whom tears came readily, but she raised her hand to her throat, where the emotion seemed struggling to escape.

"I am sorry to have forced it on you," Mr. Whetmore said, "but I wished so intensely to have you know. Such impressions are not of the moment. If you go out of my life to-morrow, I can say confidently that what you have averted can never take place. The current is changed."

He lowered his hand from his face, and, as if to emphasize his words, the mocking lines were gone, and in their place were strength



and sweetness, touched just too deeply with his habitual weariness of life.

"You overrate what I did," Marion said, finding her voice at last. "It was so little. I simply recognized what others overlooked."

"It was a conscious recognition?"

"Yes," she said, after the slightest hesitation.

"I am not a good man, Miss Clayton."

"So you have taken pains to tell me," Marion said, smiling drearily, for her nature cried out for a little of the glamour which it loved. But Mr. Whetmore was inexorable.

"There are complications in my life from whose consequences I cannot at once escape. Besides, if I were cannonized with good reason to-morrow, Brookfield must be convinced, and that is a matter of years." He had resumed the little gold-lacquer box, and turned it over in his hands. Marion leaned back in her chair, and waited for the inevitable outcome of this preface. It soon came.

"I heard something the other day which makes me feel that it is right to warn you that in receiving me you are losing some-

thing you value. You do value it, do you not?"

Marion assented.

"You have rendered me an inestimable service. I hope I have made it quite clear that it cannot be undone. It would be a poor return to injure you in any way."

Marion's thoughts flew involuntarily to the scene with Walter Kincaid, at her first coming to Brookfield. Here was the same solicitude for her welfare, but she found it far more difficult to answer. In the end, however, her answer was the same:

"Mr. Whetmore, my friendship for you is very real."

"Thank God!" he answered fervently, and as he stood up to take his leave he raised the hand which she offered him to his lips.

CHAPTER XIV.

CHARACTERS like Marion Clayton's always have a dozen motives for one action, and these are seldom laid in parallel lines. Often they are hopelessly entangled.

On the morning after Gould Whetmore's visit Marion woke with the determination to call that day on Mrs. Farraday. She owed her a visit, and why should it not be paid at once? But it may be surmised that this was not the only reason. In listening to Mr. Whetmore's confession the night before, she had been unable to avoid the inference that Mrs. Farraday was in some way connected with the crisis in his life of which he spoke.

Disagreeable as the inference had been, Marion could not conceal from herself that it carried with it its own balm. She had not gone to sleep without a consciousness, more of the heart than the head, that she had felt

at least one distinct throb of relief during Mr. Whetmore's recital, and for this throb she felt that no other source of discomfort than Mrs. Farraday herself could properly atone.

That lady was not at home when Miss Clayton returned her first visit. It was paid, therefore, to "Aunt Esther," who received her in the disheartening stiffness of the best parlour, glimmering with black haircloth and frowned upon by the family portrait gallery, enshrined in its own funeral wreaths and emblematic mottoes. Marion had felt relieved to escape even into the pitiless sunshine of a summer afternoon, for the chill of Miss West's parlour was like that of no human habitation except the last. She had wondered if Mrs. Farraday often ventured into those shades, and she smiled at the contrast between that fluttering thing and the chrysalis from which it sprang.

Later she had learned that the niece maintained a separate establishment on the other side of the house. Of this, her spiritual antennæ warned her to beware, but on this occasion she felt the pressure of her mission, which would undoubtedly be better carried

out in Mrs. Farraday's own domain. As she hesitated at the gate, to allow for the conflict of flesh and spirit, there was a flutter of white drapery on the veranda, and Mrs. Farraday herself, in a lace and ribboned negligée, fluttered down the walk. As she left the veranda she began to speak:

"I hope I may flatter myself that you have come to see me."

"I'm glad if it flatters you," Marion said, smiling. "Is Miss West at home?" she added weakly.

"I'm happy to say she is not," Mrs. Farraday replied, turning to walk beside Marion up the short path; "she has gone to the Sewing Circle, so you can't be received on that side of the house. Why should you object to coming into my parlour?"

"Why, indeed?" Marion said.

"I'm sure I don't know," retorted Mrs. Farraday brightly, throwing open the door as she spoke, and conducting Marion through a small entry into a room.

In regard to this Marion had a good deal of curiosity. She had heard that it maintained the same high strain of citified prettiness as its mistress, but she saw that it suf-

fered by the comparison, for Mrs. Farraday was not so completely in the secret of house furnishing as she was in the adornment of her person; still, the effect showed cleverness.

Mrs. Farraday busied herself in drawing up a comfortable chair and producing a fan and glass of lemonade. Then, drawing forward a light chair for herself, she began the conversation by saying:

"You are looking at my room. It's a makeshift, as you see."

"It's a very pretty one," Marion said sincerely.

"Oh, for that—— But it has not any— what do you call it—relativity. I tried to shut out Brookfield, but of course I couldn't."

"You have come very near doing so," Marion said.

"Near enough," Mrs. Farraday rejoined. "After all, it was arranged for myself, and for people who have as little reason to like Brookfield."

Marion winced; her expiation had begun.

Mrs. Farraday leaned back in her chair, playing with her fan, and scattering sparkles from a couple of jewelled rings which guarded the heavy wedding circlet.

"Of course," she said, with her usual pretty air of recklessness, "you know that this house is a rendezvous for *mauvais-sujets*, or was till you began to reform them."

"I!" Marion exclaimed; "I assure you I am innocent of any such formidable undertaking." She spoke lightly, but the expiatory shoe gave another pinch.

"Yes, that's just it," Mrs. Farraday said; "you reform involuntarily. That's what makes it so effective."

Marion was silent for a moment, as well from perplexity as vexation. Her companion, whose innate vulgarity was at all times thinly veneered, had her own reasons for trying to preserve this covering in its integrity, and it was clear that some more than common vexation must be carrying her so near the verge of impropriety. Marion's influence over Gould Whetmore had undoubtedly dealt a severe blow, and the wound to Mrs. Farraday, accomplished lady for the nonce, had revived Lizzie West, whose crudeness had been notable even in the public school of a country town.

"If you mean Mr. Whetmore and Don," Marion said at last, with her usual simplicity,

"there are not too many places where they are welcome, but they spend very little time with me."

"Oh, I was not complaining," Mrs. Farraday said hastily. She was a good deal disconcerted by Marion's directness, and changed the subject quickly by asking:

"What have you been doing lately?"

"I have been cultivating Brookfield."

"I heard that most of the festivities had been given in your honour."

"If they were, it was carefully concealed from me," Marion replied, laughing.

"Oh, well!" Mrs. Farraday said, "it is not necessary to announce it. It would be hard to give a Brookfield party just now for any other purpose." And, as Marion continued to look incredulous, she asked with some incision:

"Is it possible you don't know what a lion you are? Why, we hear you roar 'way up here on the River Road!"

"I'm afraid you are making game of me," Marion said, and in fact this was just what she did think.

"I assure you I am speaking the sober truth," asserted her hostess, leaning forward

earnestly in her chair; "and the fact is, I envy you. Goodness knows how I despise Brookfield, but, after all, it is something to be the biggest frog in the puddle."

"Of course," Marion said hesitatingly, "foreigners are always useful socially, but you are quite mistaken in supposing that I am popular here."

"Whatever it is, it has the same effect; and, for my part, if people will only treat me well to my face, I don't care what they say behind my back."

Marion smiled slightly. Mrs. Farraday's audacities did not startle her so much as their originator may have expected.

"Speaking of unpopularity," the little lady said, after a moment's pause, "how is your friend, Mr. Kincaid?"

She looked across at Marion through slightly narrowed eyelids, and it is doubtful whether her allusion was to Miss Clayton's unpopularity or to Mr. Kincaid's.

"He was very well day before yesterday," Marion said dryly.

"And he is really going abroad to study? Well, I must say, he ought to be grateful to you."

"I didn't give him his talent or his pluck," Marion said, concealing her annoyance as best she might.

"I suppose not; but, after all, what good are they without opportunity?"

"He would have made that for himself; it was only a question of time."

Mrs. Farraday smiled politely.

"I hope he will be successful. You know I have been through all that." And, as Marion did not speak, she said:

"I lived two years in the *Quartier Latin*."

"Your husband was an artist?" Marion asked, as in duty bound.

"I'm sure I don't know," Mrs. Farraday answered. "Nobody bought his pictures. He called that a proof of genius, but it was a pretty poor proof for me. You know, I made a runaway match."

Marion assented.

"I wanted to get out of Brookfield, and it seemed the only way."

Marion could no longer be surprised at such frankness, but she chose to show her distaste of it by speaking wide of the mark, and said:

"I envy you your experience of Bohemia."

I have always travelled with invalids, and my first duty was to be comfortable."

"My first duty was to be uncomfortable," said her companion.

She rose abruptly from her chair, and went to the end of the room for a framed photograph, which she brought and placed in Marion's hand. It was a well-taken view of a studio, with the usual artistic properties, some of which adorned the person of the artist, a good-looking young fellow, sitting at his easel. Behind him stood a group of men, among whom was Gould Whetmore. Mrs. Farraday, as a French peasant, was posing as model.

"That was taken just before Jack found family responsibilities too much for him," Mrs. Farraday volunteered. As Miss Clayton gave the picture back, with some polite expression of interest, she put it in its place, saying:

"I'm sure I don't know what I should have done without Mr. Whetmore. Some women might not like to admit that they had taken money from a man, but I know you won't repeat a word of this, and I don't mind telling you that I was literally an object of charity."

Marion might have been at a loss to understand the true inwardness of these too partial revelations, if she had not begun to understand their revealer. As it was, she was a little surprised at their subtlety. Mrs. Farraday's suggestions, like seeds from the careless bill of a bird, flew about in all directions; only Marion's heart, which may be likened to the sensitive soil, felt the precision of their aim.

To her hostess' last venture she had replied quickly:

"Mr. Whetmore is a most loyal friend," and after a slight pause, into which she forced herself from the intensely human wish that her companion should fancy that she did not dread the worst, she asked:

"And how did Miss West receive you again, after your sudden flight?"

"Oh, as the hundredth sheep to be brought back to the fold. Poor Aunt Esther! she is always wandering into the wilderness after me. She doesn't know yet that I am nothing but a goat."

"You must be more generous to yourself," Marion said. "You should look upon your aunt's trust in you as a strong argument in your favour." It seemed to her that

she could not be expected to bear any more of this, and, without leaving time for reply, she rose to go.

Mrs. Farraday made some pretty protestations, and, as Marion continued on her way to the door, she stepped quickly forward to open it. Her visitor found herself, not in the vestibule, but on the threshold of a bedroom. She drew back, but Mrs. Farraday said quickly:

"I wish so much to show you my view," and, incapable of the foolishness of refusing, Marion traversed the room in her hostess' wake. In this brief transit she saw that, after the foreign fashion, there was little there and that little was profusely draped in the traditional pink and white. A French window led out into the little balcony, and Mrs. Farraday stood back to let her step out. As she did so she gave an involuntary exclamation of delight.

The balcony overhung a low bluff around which swung noisily the big brook from which the River Road took its name. Its opposite bank was a steep, densely wooded slope, over whose top could be seen the mountains, their blue-gray bloom broken by

spots of dusky shadow on the steeper slopes.

"You are very fortunate," she said after a minute.

"Yes, I suppose so," Mrs Farraday replied. "You know I don't care much for this kind of thing; but the fact is, I have a sort of sentiment for this."

Marion smiled more indulgently than she could have done in the house. That peace of Nature, which, while it does not pass our understanding, has in it something of the divine, had for the moment displaced the warring emotions of the last hour, and she remembered, self-reproachfully, that even this New England Undine might have found a soul.

As she turned to go out Mrs. Farraday stopped to adjust the awning, and Marion found herself alone in the room through which they had passed. By the window stood a dressing table covered with a toilet set of heavily chased silver. It was arranged in the usual way, but at one corner the pomade boxes and essence bottles had been crowded together, and in the space so made lay a pair of heavy driving gloves and a half-smoked cigar.

Marion looked at these articles for a minute before any perception of their significance dawned upon her mind, but Mrs. Farraday's light step seemed to quicken her comprehension, and at once she felt herself becoming the victim of a blush, whose colour reached even to her hands, and glowed hotly through the neck and sleeves of her thin muslin gown. This involuntary protest disconcerted her as much as its occasion had done, and nothing but the habit of years could have made it possible for her to forestall any possible pause as she and her hostess moved toward the door. It seemed to her that she laid hands upon the first words that she could find, and she wondered to find that they were right. Mrs. Farraday accompanied her to the gate, chatting to the last, and she had walked some distance before she felt unshadowed by those eyes.

During the first few minutes she forced herself to walk slowly, but on passing out of sight of the house, she took the first turn away from the village and began to quicken her steps as if to keep pace with the thoughts that chased each other through her brain. Her dress fell from her indifferent grasp and

trailed untidily in the dust, she allowed her parasol to fall back upon her shoulder, and the loose locks of slightly curling hair which had strayed away from the rest, were caught by the hot moisture, and clung helplessly to her damp face.

Such a mood as that through which she was passing may be for a time an antidote to fatigue, and she had walked far beyond her usual limit before she was overtaken by the inevitable reaction, and forced to sit down under the shade of a tree. Her direction had been an ascending one and, as she turned back, the whole valley lay before her, with Brookfield like a pearl at the bottom of a cup.

It was a hot August day and no breeze had yet come to its relief. Low on the horizon were clouds which promised a thunder shower in the evening, but now the sun shone unimpeded and every little hollow was filled to the brim with heat so densely vaporous as to seem tangible. Through the heavy air no sounds came clearly and the trilling of the locusts was too wholly one with the heat to be recognized as sound.

In this sunny stillness Marion's turbulent

soul swung back and forth like a loud, discordant bell, and with the same pitiless iteration. It cannot be said that thoughts passed through her mind. The material out of which they could have been made was transfused into something more illusive, yet far more potent, which surged through her consciousness, possessing her with its strength. Whatever feelings—and they were many—were engulfed by this flood, that which rode its crest was undoubtedly intense disappointment in Gould Whetmore. Until this moment she had not realized how firmly she had believed in him. She had known that he was a man of the world and a little of what that might imply, yet of the soundness of his nature she had hardly felt a passing doubt. Now he stood convicted of playing a double game, in which she had figured as one of the pieces. The revulsion of feeling was for the moment almost unbearable, and she sought to ease it by owning that he was not the only one to blame. Had she not, in the face of repeated warnings, placed herself in a position where she could not reasonably resent Mrs. Farraday's retaliation; and put her friendship for a man in competi-

tion with a relation not even one of the lowest—with that there could not have been the humiliating suggestion of rivalry? Yet the fullest acknowledgment of her own indiscretion hardly helped her to explain his baseness in availing himself of it.

That he had done so showed that he was a man rather than a friend. Slight as had been his appreciation of her regard, he could not sacrifice its benefits in her favour, or in that of honour, of which it might be said that, if he had not loved it less than herself, he assuredly could not have loved her so little.

Marion told herself on her weary walk home that in this humiliating competition into which she had entered, she was at least free from concern for results, except, of course, as they deprived her of her only possible justification; but it may be surmised that she was at once too old and too young, too modern in short, not to doubt the entirety of this freedom, and with the doubt came an instant perception of the deeper spiritual degradation into which she might be drawn by the action of that hidden quicksand which underlies every such experience of youth.

CHAPTER XV.

ON the following morning Marion woke feeling languid and faint. It was not at once that her mind realized its share in the trouble, and the realization came slowly, with a deep sense of sickness of soul. But, at last, she looked her situation clearly in the face.

It need scarcely be said that, in its consideration, she grew more lenient to herself. In view of her latest interview with Gould Whetmore—to go no farther—she could not maintain the position that she had merely imagined his regard; but when she abandoned that position as untenable, she looked back to its occupancy as a solution of her difficulty. Already she found it easier to believe that she had been presumptuous than that he had been base.

Of Mrs. Farraday she scarcely thought. She was, after all, only an agency; a thing rather than a person; and Marion felt that nothing could raise her to the level

of dislike. But Gould Whetmore—from thought of him came real recoil. Marion felt that she should not be satisfied until she had defined her position in regard to him, but as she thought of the subject, there seemed to loom before her a slippery wall of rock, on whose smooth surface there appeared no room for even foothold.

She told herself that she had trusted him, this soul, whose incarnation must necessarily be imperfect; that she had reaffirmed this trust in the face of adverse evidence both circumstantial and direct; and had allowed it to crystallize into a promise of friendship, an obligation whose repudiation she could not calmly face. In the acknowledgment of his possible imperfections, had she been a child, moving through a land of dreams? Or was it that, two days before, she had been content to look down upon him with the divine pity for a soul; while now, O God! what was it that had given him this power to degrade her, to make her feel tricked and fooled as if he had caressed and then left her? The action of the quicksand had begun.

That afternoon Alice Dempster went hurriedly down High Street, to the doctor's

office. On her way back she met Mr. Clapp, taking one of his reflective strolls.

"Marion is ill, Uncle Elias," she said, stopping him.

"You don't say!" Mr. Clapp exclaimed, much troubled. "Nothing serious, is it?"

"I don't know," Alice answered in a worried tone. "The doctor has not been there yet."

Marion was not really ill. The doctor talked about a "low state of the system," and reluctantly admitted that Brookfield was not at its best in the autumn.

"You'd better go away for a few weeks," he said finally. But to this Marion would not, or could not, consent. Brookfield seemed to her, just then, like the ground beneath her feet, and to it she was held by a force stronger than that of gravity itself.

One of the first persons she saw, after her recovery, was Walter Kincaid, who brought her a big bunch of cardinal flowers, and a fresh instalment of that wealth of devotion which was so restful because it demanded no return. Marion asked about his plans.

"Oh, I don't know," he said listlessly; "I suppose I shall have to be going soon."

His words stirred no chord, even of pity, in Marion's heart. From her cushioned, lap-robed steamer chair, she looked down at him, sitting below her on the veranda step, and between them hung the mist through which, in these days, she saw the world.

"You'll like it, when you get there," she said lightly.

He was incapable of resentment toward her, but no doubt her manner stung him sharply.

"I guess you don't know how I feel," he said heavily.

It had been Marion's habit to parry such thrusts as this with some care, which yet preserved the maidenly fiction that she was unconscious of their import; but, as a ship labouring through a heavy sea cannot stop for dainty evolutions, so in the storm and stress of her present mental life, her dealings with the world could at best but partake of the grace of her personality. So she answered, without care:

"Oh, yes, I do; but you are an artist."

"I was a man first," Walter said.

"I don't know about that," Marion replied placidly; "and if you were, what has

that to do with it? To be an artist means that whatever, in other men, goes to make up life, must go, in you, to its representation."

He looked up at her earnestly. He could not suspect her trouble, but it struck him that he had not made enough allowance for her illness, and he put upon himself a power of repression which gave to his eyes so much of the silent faithfulness of the brute that Marion could hardly resist putting her hand on his head.

"Some time we will discuss this again," she said, smiling.

"When?" he asked.

"Two years from to-day," she replied promptly, and went back to her thoughts.

Marion could not escape the village sympathy, which flowed in an unsteady stream by her steamer chair, bearing on its face the substantial evidences of country pity—delicious soups and jellies, remedies and palliatives, in every form which had even a remote bearing on her case. By her sat Alice, accomplishing wonders in thread edging, and trying with zeal, not always according to knowledge, to ward off whatever she thought might be disagreeable to her friend. She

more than once observed to herself that she had never seen Marion less easily annoyed, but it is doubtful if she noticed that there was a corresponding lack of amusement for her friend in these village scenes.

The reunion of Don and Kitty had been brought to public notice and formed a theme which admitted of many interesting variations.

"Well, Marion Clayton, I hope you're satisfied this time," Aunt Susan said, almost before she had had time to inquire for Marion's health and unburden herself of a bowl of wine jelly. "Making that thing up will do you for one while, I should think."

"Why, Aunt Susan, what had I to do with it?" Marion asked in surprise.

"Oh, nothing; nothing at all!" Mrs. Clapp replied sarcastically, drawing out her knitting and beginning to work.

"You might just as well blame the town if they had come together at one of the sociables in the Hall."

"Well, I suppose you feel pretty bad about it," Mrs. Clapp said with a shrewd look.

"I feel just about as you did when it was

broken off," Marion replied with a faint smile.

At another time it was Florry Burnett. She came on one of those sultry days which have not the legitimate beauty of any season. The neglected gardens looked faded and disconsolate, the meadows brown and stubbly, and the sluggish river reflected the staring whiteness of the sky. The first glimpse of her was disheartening. She had worn her autumn costume for the sufficient reason that the dressmaker had just finished it—besides September has an "R" in it. It happened to be made of a warm brown cloth, trimmed with warm green velvet and plentifully besprinkled with large iridescent buttons which gratified Florry's love of glitter. The bonnet was a match, that fetich of country taste, and glowed and glittered, and clasped Florry's ruddy cheeks in a hot green-velvet embrace.

After polite inquiries and reassurances in regard to Marion's health, she said:

"I heard a piece of news about you the other day."

"What was it?" Marion asked civilly.

"No doubt it will be news to me."

"Oh, nothing much!" Florry said mod-

estly. "Only Mamie Glover told me that she had it on the best authority that you were engaged to Gould Whetmore."

"Indeed!" Marion said, colouring with vexation. "What does she call the best authority?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Florry (as one who should say, "How should I know about such things?"). "That was what she said. Of course I told her I didn't believe it"—with a keen glance at Marion's face—"but I don't see why you shouldn't be, according to your way of thinking."

"And what is that?" Marion asked with some curiosity.

"If you make such a friend of him, why shouldn't you marry him, I should like to know."

"For the same reason that you don't care to marry some of your men friends, I suppose," Marion answered irritably.

"Well, I don't get mad if anyone says I'm going to," Florry rejoined.

Marion smiled in spite of herself.

"If I were engaged to Mr. Whetmore——" she stopped abruptly. "But I'm not," she said.

Florry's face was a study. In it disap-

pointed suspicion struggled with gratified curiosity, and over all hovered a keen wish for any view which might be marketable.

"What about it, if you were?" she asked eagerly.

"Oh, nothing much," Marion said a little crossly. "The point is, I'm not." And here Alice interposed:

"You had better go now, Florry; she is a little tired."

It seemed strange to her that these conversations touched no oftener upon the constant subject of her thoughts, and she rightly suspected that this augured ill, for Brookfield had its own notions of reticence. Only once more was Gould Whetmore's name mentioned, and that was by Uncle Elias. He had slouched pensively up the hill on one of his daily visits, harassed by the remembrance of Mrs. Clapp's sarcasms on the probable fate of the bowl of custard which she had offered him as an excuse for going.

Relieved of this he sat comfortably by Marion's side, looking out over the meadows with a satisfaction that was the counterpart of her own.

"I saw your friend Whetmore this morn-

ing," he said so suddenly as to make her start; and as she did not reply he went on:

"He looks a long sight happier than he did before you took him up, and, for my part, I'm glad of it. Susan seems to think he's a good deal of a sinner, but I tell her that, as long as the Lord leaves folks in the world, I guess he means we should have a speaking acquaintance with them."

Marion smiled feebly, but she felt incapable of reply, and Uncle 'Lias dropped the subject with gentle tact.

But though her mind dwelt constantly on this theme it came no nearer its solution, though she continued to feel strongly that what she had seen at Mrs. Farraday's was irreconcilable with the professions which Mr. Whetmore had made to her. But this feeling was, after all, but a factor in the problem which Fate had set her to solve; for, as these professions had never been those of a lover, so her disappointment in them was not that of a friend.

Marion was too much of a person ever to have looked upon love in its personal form as the whole of life, but she was too truly a woman not to have held it to be life's crown,

and her course as, in some sort, an ascending path leading to some unimagined mountain height where, in the glory as of an eternal morning, her coronation should take place. With what concern then, did she see herself, stepping downward toward it by this pathway set with thorns. There were moments when, in her loneliness, she could have cried out to Alice for relief, but it could only be the impulse by which, in darkness, one gropes for a friendly hand. Even the most sympathetic friendship would have failed to help her now.

In these troubled days Marion received a revelation of her character comparable in its completeness only to the drowning man's picture of his life. She saw that the qualities in herself which she had most valued, and which had given her in the eyes of others her chief charm, were compounded of a subtle mixture of their opposites; and no doubt one of her most insistent sensations continued to be wounded pride, which smarts like a flesh wound, when some more vital part may, all the while, be bleeding inwardly.

It must not be supposed that Marion in all this time had heard nothing from Gould Whetmore, though it was so long before she

did so that she had begun to suspect that Mrs. Farraday had made him acquainted with her *coup*. One morning, when she came out to the veranda, she found a thick, square envelope lying on the top of the pile of letters from the post. She opened it and read as follows:

"MY DEAR MISS CLAYTON:

"I hope I am not taking your friendly interest too much for granted in letting you know that my father's illness has taken a decided turn for the worse. It is most unfortunate that just at this time his affairs oblige me to be away.

"I stopped at Meadowview last evening, hoping for a chance of bidding you good-bye, and I heard for the first time of your illness.

"If it is not too much to ask, will you let me know how you are, addressing me at 'Graham & Graham's, Wall Street'?

"Please understand that you cannot possibly exaggerate my anxiety.

"Most Sincerely Yours,

"GOULD WHETMORE."

When Alice arrived for the day she found Marion with two piles of envelopes in her

lap; she handed one of them to her, saying with a smile:

“Notes of condolence—will you say the proper thing?” and among them was the thick, square envelope addressed in a masculine hand.

CHAPTER XVI.

ONE day, about a week after Marion's return to her usual life, Walter Kincaid stood on the doorstep of the Clayton homestead, waiting for admission. For several days the air had been cooler, but a frost the night before had brought the first real promise of a change, and here and there stood a flaming tree, as if Autumn raised a warning finger to Summer.

It was plain that outdoor life was nearly over for the season, and, with the thought, Walter had a sudden perception of the satisfying substitute which, during the slow course of the winter, would go within this house. From this he was about to separate himself by his own act; and even now, his dominant passion would not vouchsafe to him the luxury of unalloyed regret, though his going was as the tearing asunder of soul and spirit.

He had received his marching orders, and in less than a week he would be gone.

So completely had he been absorbed in the thought of Miss Clayton and the effect that his news would have upon her, that he had not considered the possibility of her not being at home and stared helplessly at Mary, who took pity upon him and said:

"I dare say she will be in soon, sir; won't you please to come in and wait?"

Marion had evidently left the house in some haste, for the library, into which Mr. Kincaid wandered mechanically, was strewn with traces of her; and these brought to the young man a fresh access of poignant regret. He glanced somewhat carelessly at the desk. Marion had written him few notes, and it had no association other than a general one with her personality. The big table in the middle of the room, scattered with magazines and books, arrested his attention, for, through it, Marion had tried to connect his crude intelligence with that of a larger life. But after all, he stopped by the low stand on which were Marion's work-bag and kindred matters; and which, cleared of its personal litter, was used to hold

the five-o'clock tea tray, the after-dinner coffee service, or the occasional chocolate pot. Here, during his visits, Marion had sat sewing or pretending to sew, sorting her silks or simply doing nothing, and here she had dispensed the hospitality which had been the social experience of his life.

He eyed the bulging work-bag covetously. He would no more have been guilty of the crudeness of touching it than of snatching a kiss from its owner; but some temptations demand instant relief and he turned sharply toward the window, looking out over the way by which Marion would come.

She was not in sight, but, instead, a man's figure came slowly along the path bordering the drive. Walter was familiar with the sight of Gould Whetmore and he knew that he visited Miss Clayton; yet this view of him came with a sharp surprise. Why is he here? seemed the most natural question. He turned from the window as the door bell rang, and stood by the table, waiting.

Mr Whetmore hesitated only a moment, after hearing that Miss Clayton was out. "I will come in and wait," he said, and, stepping inside the door, he began to take off his coat.

Mary stood respectfully by while he disposed of this and his hat, but as he turned toward the parlour she said:

“Won’t you please to walk into the library, sir? Mr. Kincaid’s waiting there, too.”

If this information had been given earlier, Mr. Whetmore might have postponed his visit to another day, but there was no hint of this in the manner in which he entered the library and greeted Walter.

The two men were in fine contrast. In looking at Kincaid, it was impossible not to think of those heroes of the world when it was young, who so unmistakably held in themselves the essential elements of life that we have never since been able to do anything but refine upon them. Gould Whetmore represented, in some sort, the result of this process of refinement, and in the greeting of the two men there was more than met the eye.

“I think I may almost call you an acquaintance,” the older man said pleasantly, offering his hand.

Walter gave his ungrudgingly, and yet there was something in this ease—free from assumption, as it was—which irritated him,

as nothing from Marion had ever done, and it is doubtful whether this points to the more delicate dexterity of women in social matters or to that consciousness of the superiority of each sex over the other which sustains a man and woman in the face of unequal relations.

On his part Mr. Whetmore would not have hesitated to declare that whatever comfort he took in his advantages, he was far from exaggerating their value, and that the concentration implied in the simplicity of such a character and experience as Walter Kincaid's made his own diffusion seem hopelessly futile.

But he had a distinct personal interest in the young man, which for the moment kept him from such thoughts. He was in the way of hearing reports of Marion's association with him, and the value of these had lately been heightened by the interruption of his own relation with her. "Was Walter Kincaid in any way responsible for it?" he could not help asking himself; and in spite of what he felt to be a fine perception of Marion's requirements, he could not, in the face of such splendid manhood, answer definitely, "No."

For a moment he undoubtedly felt the more perturbed of the two, yet the habit of his life made it possible for him to sustain the burden of the talk until Walter was able to help him, and the two men were soon on friendly terms.

"How well Miss Clayton understands the decorative value of this sort of thing!" Mr. Whetmore said, as they drew their chairs toward the fire.

"Well, I don't know as I ever thought of that," Walter replied. "I know she lights one oftener than most." As he spoke he glanced from the fire to the room, taking in, with his accustomed quickness, this new idea of their relation.

Mr. Whetmore observed him closely, and after a minute said abruptly:

"You are an artist, I believe."

Kincaid laughed.

"I guess whoever told you that was a little ahead of time."

"Well," Mr. Whetmore said, smiling, "what is the truth up to date?"

"I'm going to help cut Mr. Gründwald's statues, and he'll tell me whether it's worth while for me to study or not. There isn't much artist about that."

"I suppose you'll admit that you have the soul of one," Mr. Whetmore said. He had risen, and stood with his back to the fire, looking down at the young man with kindly, appreciative eyes, which yet held a little more than usual of their subtle suggestion of pain.

"I've got the wants of one, if that's what you mean," Walter said, looking back, with his clear eyes full of the humour of his race.

Mr. Whetmore laughed, but the thought of Marion's requirements gave him less comfort than before.

"You are greatly to be envied," he said with a sigh.

"Well, that's according to the way you look at it," the other replied with an unaccountable return of his first feeling of irritation.

Mr. Whetmore took one or two turns about the room. It seemed to him that the air was charged with earnestness, and he found it hard to keep up the conversation on conventional lines. "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" was the substance of his thought, and it seemed as if he must have expressed it if Walter Kincaid had not said:

"I guess a man can't have everything."

At this point a light step fell on the porch. Kincaid was the first to hear it, but it was Gould Whetmore who opened the door, letting in a cold blast of air, which brought Marion shivering in its wake. She had dreaded this first meeting with Mr. Whetmore only less than its postponement, and she would have said that its imminence had always been present to her mind; but, as a matter of course, it seized her in her one unguarded moment. At sight of him there swept over her a wave of deadly faintness, and a cold trembling seemed to make it impossible for her to stand. On his part, what seemed to him evidences of her illness filled him with distress, and he was not insensible to her alienation from him, though he was far from rightly connecting one with the other.

"Are you quite well?" he asked. "Are you sure that it was prudent to be out on such a day?" He seemed to have forgotten that he held her hand, and Marion had not the courage to remind him.

Walter Kincaid, standing in the library, was a witness of this meeting, whose words

were inaudible, but whose aspect said enough. The hot, foreign blood crowded into his face obliterating the shrewd humour and gentle tolerance of its Yankee lines, and making him look as un-American as he felt. No doubt, the pressure of his feeling brought Marion's eyes to his face; what she saw there, acting as a counter-irritant to her mood, unexpectedly steadied her, and brought the blood back from her heart. She disengaged her hand from Mr. Whetmore's, and went forward to offer it to Kincaid, and her manner, in its warm cordiality, was full of that sense of contact which had faded from it so sensibly in the last few weeks. Her mind, too, had its former alertness, for she said:

"I hope you have not come to tell me that you must go."

"Just about that," Walter said with a sigh. His face was still flushed and his manner ardent, but the effect was of irradiation rather than heat. It was something to hold the real Marion once more by the hand.

She gave frank expression to her regret, and, as she turned away from him, she came face to face with Mr. Whetmore, who had

followed her into the room, and stood waiting for her to be seated. His manner had its usual recollected poise, and his face gave no clew to his immediate feeling; but there was about both an unusual intensity, a faint suggestion of anxiety, which was at variance with the air of resigned hopelessness which commonly characterized him. This look stung Marion to the quick, offering her freshly, as it did, the alternative of his treachery or her presumption, but it did not deprive her again of her self-possession. She moved quietly about, laying aside her hat and cape, drawing forward the tea-table, and making it ready for the tray; all the while asking Walter Kincaid about the details of his departure, and inquiring thoughtfully for Mr. Whetmore's father, and about his own trip. But all the sweet reality had faded from her manner. She was back again fighting shadows in her world of dreams.

She looked so wholly unfit for exertion that, when the tea-tray was brought, Mr. Whetmore said:

"Won't you put me in command? You know that at home I am the lady of the house."

Marion smiled.

"You are very good," she said; and at once returned to her chair.

As she sat by the fire, with hands clasped lightly on her knees, her eyes resting idly on the blaze, she looked very lovely to the two men to whom, in different ways, she meant so much. Marion's loveliness was so inseparable from herself that illness could not fade nor trouble dull it; and in looking at her, one felt that as her youth had been full of grace, so her age would be of charm. But this loveliness, usually so limpid, seemed now to be mysteriously clouded, and each man felt this in his own way.

It fell to Mr. Whetmore to make conversation, and as he arranged the teacups, and began in a methodical way to make the tea, he said:

"Mr. Kincaid and I were talking about Paris when you came in."

"I hope you told him it was not all studios," Marion said.

"I mentioned the fact, but I doubt if it made any impression."

"I dare say not," she said dryly.

"I guess Mr. Gründwald wouldn't spe-

cially care to have me know it," Walter said; "I'd like to know how Miss Clayton would want to have one of her workmen running 'round town instead of minding his own business."

"You're not a workman," Marion said with a touch of irritation. "Cream and sugar, please," in answer to a question of Mr. Whetmore. As she took the cup from his hand she fancied that he observed her, and with this fancy came a blush, which deepened when she suspected his possible meaning. Annoyance at his suspicion and her own acknowledgment of it sharpened her voice, as she spoke the first words that occurred to her:

"I have no patience with his excuses, and he cannot defend his temperament; it is charming, but inadequate."

It was Walter's turn to flush now. Her words conveyed no distinct impression to his mind, but the tone was clearly intelligible, and how should he know that it referred to the other man, whose self-possession took no apparent note of her meaning. He received his teacup mechanically, and after a moment's irresolution, set it down on the table

near him, while Mr. Whetmore poured a cup for himself, saying:

"I should hardly have put it so strongly."

Marion stirred her tea carefully. Her composure had returned, and she replied, smiling slightly, and glancing toward Walter:

"Oh, Mr. Kincaid does not mind! He knows it's a tribute to his greatness."

From this moment all might have gone well if Mr. Whetmore had not had what seemed to him a good idea. Asking to be excused, he went into the hall, and came back holding in his hand a tiny silver flask, from which he was unscrewing the top.

"I am not an advocate of the practice," he said, walking toward Miss Clayton, "but I really think you are a subject for a few drops of curaçoa in your tea."

At sight of the flask Marion became scarlet.

"Oh no! No I thank you!" she exclaimed, and raised her hand, as if to shield her cup.

"You need not use force," Mr. Whetmore said, in the low, even voice which in some natures expresses irritation. He offered the flask to Mr. Kincaid, and, on its being declined, went again into the hall, and returned without it.

Marion tried bravely to regain her serenity, but in imagination she was again standing in Mrs. Farraday's room, looking at that litter of silver pieces, whose pattern was the same as that of the little flask; and once more she saw the gloves and cigar whose damaging evidence had so troubled her. Weak from her illness, tired by her walk, and overstrained by her position in regard to the two men who were with her, it was no wonder that the struggle unnerved her, and the hot tears which rose to her eyes were only kept from falling by utmost resolution.

Both men looked at her with concern, which in the case of Walter Kincaid was entirely visible. His relations with Marion had for some time fallen short of his wishes, but in this failure there had, until lately, been little of bitterness, and what there was had been so melted by concern for her health that only to-day had it seemed to bear an incurable sting. It was not strange if he connected Gould Whetmore with his pain, and he wished fiercely for his departure, promising himself a verification of his suspicions before he left the house.

Gould Whetmore read him easily, but Ma-

tion was beyond him. He would not allow himself to draw hasty conclusions, and at present it only seemed clear to him that he ought to withdraw. Pending the fitting opportunity to do so, he talked mechanically of whatever came uppermost, and Marion was soon able to second him, though Walter remained silent. But he felt the relief of being able to put down his cup and bid Marion good-bye.

"I think the rest of this visit belongs, in all fairness, to Mr. Kincaid," he said, as he took her hand; and, turning to the young man, he wished him a pleasant voyage and good luck in his work.

"I shall write to Gründwald, and ask him to rescue you from your temperament," he said, smiling; and, to do Walter justice, he tried to make a suitable reply to this courtesy.

While the two men were speaking, Marion moved across the hall to the parlour, and returned with a small volume in her hand. Mr. Whetmore had brought it to her at his last visit, and there had been a half understanding that she would return it herself, giving him the opportunity to present her

to his father. Obviously, this intention had been abandoned. As he took the book from her hand, with some polite expression of his pleasure in relieving her of it, he told himself that his constant anticipation of this moment should have prepared him for its pain; but Marion's assurance of friendship had carried such entire conviction to his heart that he found it unspeakably hard to put himself again in the attitude of mind which had preceded it.

They were standing in the hall, almost on the spot where that assurance had been given, and it was recalled vividly to his mind. Had he not a right to know why the cup which she herself had held to his lips was being so unmistakably withdrawn? He regarded her intently.

"Are you quite well?" he asked.

"Oh, quite; it was only river mist."

Marion was conscious of nothing except a wish that he would go. She looked down to avoid his eyes, for she knew that their expression must answer in intensity to the pressure of his hand.

"What is it?" he asked, so low that only

Marion's strained ears could have caught the words.

He fancied that there was an answering question in the eyes which she at last raised to his. She shook her head:

"I don't know," she answered, lower still.

He stood looking at her for another moment, and then quickly stepped to the door, and was gone.

Marion did not return at once to the library, and as she lingered on the spot where she had parted from Gould Whetmore she owned to herself that she could not quite disbelieve in him, in spite of the evidence of her senses—and then she asked herself "Which senses?" for Marion was conscious of the possession of those spiritual ones, which all of us have, but few of us know how to use.

CHAPTER XVII.

ON the morning of the day on which Walter Kincaid was to leave Brookfield he stood once more in the library of Meadowview.

"I want you should know," he said steadily, "that I'm glad I said what I did after Mr. Whetmore went out the other day; only I guess it would have been better if I hadn't spoken of anybody but myself."

Marion shook her head a little sadly.

"I don't know as I should ever have got over it if I'd let the chance go by, and I wanted you should know."

Marion leaned against the mantel; her thin, nervous hand grasping its edge, her eyes looking down where the fire had been.

"Do you think it serves any purpose for us to go over it again?" She looked up at him deprecatingly; the superiority of Marion Clayton merged for the moment in that inherited instinct of subjection which at times

rules even the modern woman in the presence of man.

"I guess there's something I've got to say, if you don't mind," he answered; and neither of them smiled.

"Very well," she said with an effort.

"I don't want you should think I don't care. I care all there is——" He stopped abruptly, his eyes glowing, and Marion rightly guessed that it was with difficulty that he restrained himself from farther expression in that direction. "But it's just this way—you've pretty nearly made me over, and what you've put in my way 'll do the rest. You don't suppose I'm going to blame you because you can't give me everything I want, any more than I would my Maker."

Marion raised her hand with an imperious gesture of protest, but Walter towered above her, splendidly passionate and controlled.

"There's just one thing more," he said steadily. "If you should belong to somebody else, it's all right; only you can't help my belonging to you, and that ought to be enough for one man."

Marion was deeply stirred.

"Oh, my friend!" she exclaimed, and in her tone there was regret for herself as well as for him.

A few minutes later he held her hand for the last time.

"You must be a great sculptor," she said, trying to speak lightly.

"I'll be a good stone-cutter, at any rate," he answered, eager to second her; for her sweet face seemed to petition him for a little of the old easy relation at the last.

He never quite knew how he broke away from her and made his way to the village. His heart was hot within him; for the first and last time in his life he cursed the thought of his art—that other mistress, who drew him with so strong a hand.

On the first of October Brookfield was to hold its annual coaching parade. Marion had at first refused to take any part in it, for to exhibit herself, under any pretext, could never be anything but disagreeable to a woman of her type, and just at this time seemed particularly distasteful.

"Don't let them make me, Alice! I am both sick and sorry," she pleaded, but without success.

The parade had originated several years before, during an autumn in which a number of city people were staying in Brookfield; and for a time it had been known in the village as the "Dempster parade." But each year had seen the addition of one or two carriages belonging to persons outside the circle, even to the tally-ho from the livery stables, manned by a somewhat doubtful set. This year, Florry Burnett had busied herself in extracting promises of participation from persons who had taken no part in the function since its foundation, but her plea for keeping up its original respectability seemed futile, in the face of the fact that it was to be held on the same day as the county cattle show, an event of some importance to a number of surrounding towns.

Yet Marion found herself, on the morning of the day, standing on her porch and looking critically at her fantastically trimmed phaeton, with its pair of lively bays. These were a loan to her from a friend who had gone abroad. She had driven them several times since her illness, and found them a happy combination of high spirits and good temper, with the quick observation which

always seemed to her to be far less dangerous than the stupidity, which passes for virtue, in horses as well as men. Yet she half wished that she had not decided to risk herself with them in such a wholly untried field, the more so as she knew how fatally such a doubt can communicate itself from driver to horses in a moment of danger. She noted with uneasiness that their trappings annoyed them, and that the sensitive ears quivered at the faint sound of music. But Marion's courage was not of the sort to permit her to give out at the last moment, and she stepped into the phaeton and gathered up the reins, before her thought had become doubt.

The day was of the sort to reassure her. The sky was deeply blue, and had lent its colour to the distant mountains, up to which swept the lower line of hillsides, in a sheet of flame. The browns and yellows of the meadows were a relief, making a soft background for the river, which seemed thrown across them like a ribbon of brilliant blue. The air was clear and golden; the valley seemed like a deep champagne cup, wrought to hold such sparkling nectar. It would have been a dull soul that could drink it in with-

out exhilaration, and Marion's was not a dull soul. A radiant hopefulness, a love of life, rose in her heart, and for the moment blotted out the discouragement of the last few weeks. She held the reins with confidence, and the bays responded gladly to the assurance of her touch.

She joined the procession first on High Street, just opposite the Clapps'. Aunt Susan had been half persuaded to appear in costume, in her father's old chaise, but had resigned in favour of another old lady with less dignity to support. She now sat on the porch, her knitting in her lap, waving a handkerchief excitedly to acquaintances in the crowd.

Don, who had been working at Broadtown ever since the renewal of his engagement, was in Brookfield for the day, and could be seen on his favourite horse, giving efficient help to the management. His greeting to Miss Clayton held even more than its usual warmth, but his face fell as he added:

"I say, you don't look a bit well. This is a beastly hole in the fall. Better come up to Broadtown; the air is fine there, I can tell you."

"I suppose I might take Kitty, in case I should be ill," Marion said slyly. She looked with warm affection into the frank young face, and its happiness compensated her for much of the sorrow of her own.

"You mustn't talk that way, if you don't mean it," the boy said impetuously; but just here someone called him away, and he had only time to indicate to Marion her place, which (doubtless for his better convenience) was just behind Kitty.

That young woman had just returned from a visit and presented a blooming appearance to a lenient town. She had spent the evening before with Marion, and as she greeted her, her steadfast eyes glowed with the remembrance of their talk. As the carriages came into line it was balm to Marion's wounded soul to watch the confident bearing of the glossy head rising out of the mass of asters and golden-rod with which her village cart was trimmed.

The decorated top of her own phaeton made it impossible for Marion to see who was behind her. She wondered a little, for there were many glances from bystanders in that direction, and it seemed a rallying point for

the riders who formed part of the parade. It was not long, however, before she recognized the high-pitched but not unpleasant voice of her acquaintance of the River Road speaking her name.

"It's not likely she would take part in anything so mixed," it concluded, after some general remarks about her which made Marion's ears tingle.

"Perhaps she and Gould are off for a quiet ride," suggested another voice slyly.

"More likely her mill-hand lover," Mrs. Farraday retorted sharply. Marion was surprised at the coarseness of word and tone. She had not understood Mrs. Farraday's capacity for being "all things to all men."

"Hold on, now, Lizzie!" said a fresh voice, which Marion recognized as belonging to an acquaintance of Don. "You're going a little too far."

"I'm sure I beg your pardon," Mrs. Farraday returned; "I thought I was among friends," and before the boy could reply she was speaking to someone else in the ring.

"Do you go up there, too?"

"Can't say that I do. Why?"

"Oh, I know she has a sort of male re-

formatory, and I didn't know but you were one of the inmates."

The laugh which followed this sally was drowned in the first notes of the band, and the parade began.

Marion's attention was called sharply to her horses. They had been restless before, teased by their trappings, fretted by delay, and startled by the passing and repassing of riders, the flutter of ribbons, and shrill screams of children in the waiting crowd; so that the music acted on overstrained nerves. They shied violently when a belated horseman hurried to his place at the head of the line, and it was hard to subdue them to a walk.

Marion's serenity was all gone. The air, which an hour before had filled her with new life, seemed drained of its freshness in this noisy crowd; and her mind, which should have been wholly given to her horses, was preoccupied by the subject recalled to it by Mrs. Farraday's words. She wished miserably that she had not come, and soon determined to take the first chance of escape. Meanwhile she tightened her hold on the reins, drawing them in resolutely, and, by an

encouraging word and soothing tone, did all in her power to assume the firmness which she lacked. But animals are connoisseurs in courage, and Marion felt that these were not assured of hers.

The end of the street was reached at last, and Marion breathed more freely as, leaving the line of vehicles, she turned into a narrow lane and crossed over to the next highway. At the second turn, just as she was considering the wisdom of giving her horses their heads, she came suddenly upon a belated tally-ho, going in hot haste to join the parade. At sight of a decorated carriage the guard sounded his horn, and a dozen handkerchiefs fluttered from the top. Moved by one impulse the bays sprang forward and broke into a run, their heads thrown up till the flying manes seemed almost in Marion's eyes. She was used to horses, and in moments of real peril she had the instinct of a noble race, which is as far from the possibility of abject fear as of stolid indifference to danger. She gave the reins a quick turn around her hands and glanced consideringly at the whip. Nothing except imperfect acquaintance with their dispositions prevented her laying it across the

backs of the refractory pair. At last she got them somewhat in hand, and ventured to turn one or two corners in the direction of her home. To reach this, it was necessary to recross High Street, and, as she neared it, an ominous stir shook the air. It was too late to turn back when the last corner brought her almost to its source, the band began suddenly to play, and the full tide of the procession surged up the street.

The horses stopped, then sprang forward, but finding themselves sharply restrained, backed wildly, tilting the light carriage perilously. Here courage availed nothing and coolness much; and Marion had the one but not the other. The street seemed deserted, but as she looked about nervously for help, she saw Gould Whetmore turning into it from a neighbouring lane. He sprang forward almost as she called his name. Seizing the horses by their heads, he righted them sharply, sprang to the seat, and gathering up the reins, turned resolutely into High Street.

For a moment Marion could not feel even physical relief. Her arms ached to the shoulder, and relieved of responsibility, she had time for fright. Yet so completely did

she feel her companion to be master of the situation, that she never once thought of giving him the history of her morning, and he was quite unprepared for the frightened strength with which the bays tore their way through the crowd. With necks stretched forward and noses to the wind they defied steadily his attempts to bring them to an issue, and as he saw over the meadows the Homestead gate, and calculated swiftly the increased impetus of the home stretch, he exclaimed involuntarily:

“Good God, Marion! I can’t hold them.”

Marion’s dormant courage sprang to life at the word, and with something more than the physical exhilaration of danger. That swirled about her, with the crisp rush of an eddy, carrying her senses with it, yet making for her a central spot, calmer than any in the world outside, where her soul faced Gould Whetmore’s, freed from all baffling bodily conditions. It was as if her spirit sprang to the conclusion suggested by his words, and he and she were already beyond the grave.

Marion was at all times sensitive, to clairvoyance; and, in danger, even dull souls pierce the veil of flesh. She had an instant

sense that she saw Gould Whetmore as he was; a noble soul, mated to hers from all eternity.

While neither of them was afterward able to remember that she had communicated this vision by word or look, yet the man was instantly aware of it.

It was characteristic of the difference in their sex and temperament that, to her, death should have seemed a small price to pay for such knowledge, while in him it awoke a determination to sell his life dear. The horses were approaching the gate posts, where wreck would be inevitable. He rose to his feet, wound the reins quickly about his hands, and, saying to her, "Jump, when I tell you!" by main force pulled the pair upon their haunches, cramping the wheel sharply in the act.

For a second the rocking carriage was poised for flight. Marion had gathered her skirts about her, and at the word "Jump!" she sprang clear of the wheel, falling face downward on the grass, as the carriage, with Gould Whetmore still clinging to the reins, struck the gate post and swept up the drive.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A CONFUSED sense of voices and movements, out of which she was always on the point of making something intelligible, harassed Marion for a time; then she began quietly to sink into some element unknown to her before. Fathoms deep, she felt the impulse to rise, and struggled choking to the surface, but fell back again, only to repeat the experience to the point of seeing familiar faces and hearing half remembered tones. Then down again, and peaceful sleep, from which she woke, naturally, to find old Dr. Foster and Anne Atley, the village nurse, standing by her as she lay in her own bed.

"A little more, now," the doctor was saying, and Anne put something hot and fragrant to her lips.

"What became of the horses?" Marion asked distinctly; her sense of responsibility for them serving to bring them first to her mind.

"Right enough; thanks to your young man," replied the doctor.

He was a big, jovial fellow, with unlimited license of speech, not always welcome to Marion. The indisputable fact that he had brought her into the world never seemed quite excuse enough. Even now she was not too weak to be annoyed, but he hailed this as an encouraging sign.

"That's right, blush away!" he said complacently; and began measuring medicine into a glass.

When he was gone Marion looked doubtfully at the nurse. She had one of those faces, common in the country, which is palpably a mask, but with no one knows what correspondence with the personality beneath. Marion had heard of her as a gossip, and hesitated to give her the excuse for speaking with authority in regard to her affairs; but her growing anxiety to know about Mr. Whetmore conquered this hesitation and she asked if he had been seriously hurt.

"Not a bit, not a bit!" affirmed Miss Atley; but this was, perhaps, in deference to the doctor's orders, for she added: "I guess he was pretty well bruised if the

truth was known, and the doctor thinks there's a muscle tore off his side, but excepting for that, I don't believe he'll have worse than a sprained arm, unless there's something internal."

Marion thrilled with horror, then smiled hysterically.

"Did he walk away?" she asked.

"Oh, law, yes! without much more than a pretty bad limp; but I guess he got young Fisher to drive him home. His arms won't be good for much, for one while," exclaimed Miss Atley with professional satisfaction.

Marion sighed wearily. She felt herself slipping from consciousness and could only reproach herself faintly for her waning interest in her preserver's fate. The nurse bustled about reproachfully, gave restoratives, and, by way of throwing the responsibility off her own shoulders, said:

"You look out now and don't get yourself excited or the doctor 'll be blaming me." And Marion obediently turned to the wall and slept. She had suffered from simple concussion of the brain, but the circumstance of her fainting, which might be referred to the excitement rather than the injury, had made


Dr. Foster apprehensive of more serious symptoms. These, however, did not appear. By the evening of the day following the accident she was suffering only from intense nervousness and a severe bruise on the temple, and on the day following that, she dressed herself resolutely and went downstairs.

It was most unfortunate for our heroine that, just at this time, Alice Dempster should be away. Brookfield, however out of sympathy with some of Miss Dempster's traits, understood them perfectly, and gave to them the respect which it denied to Marion's less intelligible qualities. She had often stood between her friend and the town. It felt her absence as the absence of restraint, and unhesitatingly took advantage of the circumstance that Marion was at its mercy.

"I'm just going straight up to Marion Clayton's to find out what all this means," announced Mrs. Clapp, in the act of tying her bonnet strings before her bewildered husband.

"Bless my soul, Susan, you talk as if you supposed Marion looked around for Gould Whetmore to stop that team!"

"Well, how do you know she didn't?" re-



torted Mrs. Clapp. "I heard you and Robert Burnett calling it a lucky accident. Lucky fiddlesticks! I guess she thinks so herself." And off went Mrs. Clapp, full of a purpose that had been maturing ever since Marion came to Brookfield.

She left her husband standing thoughtfully on the doorstep, shooting anxious glances up and down the street. The wind had risen in the night, blowing clouds across the sky, and bringing the dry leaves in showers from the trees, to send them whirling over the meadows in a miniature dance of death. Later, a cold rain would follow, but now it was a dust storm in which everything looked dreary and dishevelled.

Uncle 'Lias was a man and an old one, but one is not an observer for a lifetime for nothing. He put two and two together with the painstaking precision of his sex; then he buttoned his coat, put on a neatly brushed silk hat, and started in the direction of the Whetmore place.

When Mrs. Clapp reached Meadowview she found Marion sitting before her library fire, the long stalks of a dozen hothouse roses lying across her lap. As her visitor came

toward her her hand closed involuntarily over the note which had lain on top of the flowers, but the old lady's sharp eyes fastened suspiciously on the exposed corner and allusions to it seemed mingled with the words of her greeting.

"Well, I must say you're a pretty looking sight!" she exclaimed, as she seated herself and looked Marion all over. "Got any more bruises?"

"Oh, just a few!" Marion said.

"Well, I never!" Mrs. Clapp exclaimed, feeling for the knitting which, unhappily, she had not brought.

Marion was quite passive. She understood perfectly that Mrs. Clapp would make herself thoroughly disagreeable, and she carefully husbanded her small stock of strength and energy for the final scene. This did not come at once. Etiquette required that there should first be a careful verification of the steps by which the catastrophe had been reached. As Marion finished her relation of these Mrs. Clapp exclaimed again:

"Well, I never!" Then sat staring at her hostess with eyes which looked sharp enough to pierce her very soul.

Marion stirred uneasily, and finally rose and rang for Mary to take away the flowers. After a second's hesitation she dropped the note on a table just under Mrs. Clapp's nose, but the mere fact of her hesitation humiliated her and brought the first revulsion of the feeling which had possessed her so completely for two perfect days.

It was not long before Mrs. Clapp came to the point. As Marion settled again into her chair she said:

"Well, now, Marion Clayton, I should just like to know what's going to be the end of all this business?"

Marion thought swiftly. In view of her real relation to Gould Whetmore, fencing on that point seemed worse than foolish, and she counted, too, on the effectiveness of truth as a means of concealment.

"I do not know myself, Aunt Susan," she said simply.

"Of course you know, just as well as I do, what he's thought of in this town. Folks talk about his staying here to look after his father: guess he makes a pretty good thing of it, that's all I have to say. Dandering round down there at the tavern and where-

ever he can get a fool to join him, to say nothing of that trollop out on the River Road. If your mother was alive——”

“Aunt Susan, I cannot allow you to speak to me of my mother.”

“Highty, tighty, miss! I’d like to know why not,” retorted the enraged old lady, untying her bonnet strings and throwing them back over her shoulders. “Caroline Webster aint sainted yet, that I know of.”

Marion had sprung to her feet and stood quivering with feeling, the expression of which hardly served to veil from herself the shame that it was not all for her mother. For the rest, passionate loyalty to her lover, and the woman’s wish to stand beside him in this shadow of a shame, mingled with her fine sense of the pettiness of the occasion for heroic feeling.

But Aunt Susan had not waited for reflection. She continued without pause:

“Before ever you came to Brookfield, when you took up with that Kincaid boy, I said to ’Lias Clapp that I should admire to know what next, but I never dreamed of such goings on as this. And you mark my words, Marion Clayton: you can be a fool and

marry him if you want to, but you'll never take him along with you in this town; and when you're mistress up there, what about that Farraday woman, I'd like to know. Going to let him divide his time between you? Now you just keep still till I have my say"—for Marion made an involuntary movement as if to speak. "You young folks don't think about these things, and it's 'I can't allow you' and 'manage my own affairs,' but you mark my words or you'll be humbled in the dust, for there's more than one person that's ready to hint that Marion Clayton's no better than she should be."

"Aunt *Susan*!" Marion interposed desperately; but Mrs. Clapp went on relentlessly:

"There's May Caldwell married just such another city scamp, and where is she now? Home, of course, all her money gone and two children into the bargain; miserable, peaked little things, Dr. Foster says——"

"Aunt Susan, I shall leave the room if you say another word," interposed Marion decisively. "I don't want to forget that you are an old lady and a visitor in my house, but I am a grown woman, and you must un-

derstand that there are some things I cannot be expected to bear."

The two women faced each other across the narrow space, and the elder saw her own resolution sustained by the fire of youth, beside whose steady blaze hers seemed but a flash in the pan. It was not to be expected that she should own herself conquered, but she knew that she was.

"You can talk if you want to; I've had my say."

At this moment the front door opened without warning, and a few quick steps brought Alice Dempster to the room. Marion greeted her with a cry of joy, and the two were soon in each other's arms. Miss Dempster was moved beyond her wont. Marion had become very dear to her, and the sense of her danger, of which Alice had known nothing until that morning, smote her with all its possibilities of pain. After her first question about Marion's state she turned to Mrs. Clapp, who, after tying her bonnet strings, was weaving a shawl pin in and out with her customary decision.

"How do you do, Auntie? I didn't mean to drive you away."

"I guess you needn't mind about that; it's been pretty well given out that I'm not wanted here," said her aunt grimly; and before either of her companions could reply she stalked toward the door, turning to say as she held the knob in her hand:

"I've managed to satisfy my conscience, anyway, and if Marion Clayton's bound to make a fool of herself, the dead can't reproach me." With which clever evasion of Marion's mandate, she let herself out and sped toward home.

Alice turned to Marion with an inquiring look.

"She said some things which I could not be expected to bear."

Miss Dempster had not quick perceptions, but she was a capital nurse.

"I think, Marion, that you ought to lie down," she said, in her practical way, and after she had made her friend quite comfortable in a darkened room, she kissed her with real warmth and left her mercifully without a word.

CHAPTER XIX.

AT seven o'clock of the same day Marion was once more in the library. She had hesitated at the door of the parlour, for the visit she was about to receive was emphatically one of ceremony; but the heirlooms with which the room was crowded seemed as coldly unsympathetic as did the family portraits on the walls. They would have made an appropriate background for a case of conscience. Here, the books, at least, were her friends, and those things which we call inanimate were each made living by some memory embodied in it like a soul. Yet even here it was impossible for her to be seated, and she paced the floor or stood by the fender, looking with wide eyes at the leaping flames.

She was conscious only of a dull bewilderment at the resistless nature of the forces by which the bells of her life were rung backward.

She had come to Brookfield for peace and had found a sword. She loved Gould Whetmore—by moments, there was rapture in the thought; she trusted the soundness of his nature with what she believed to be her truest instincts, and she did not deny the vision which she had had in that supreme moment of danger. But in Brookfield visions seemed out of place. Plain facts were against him and, in that atmosphere, she found it hard to take her happiness in their teeth. To be sure, she might question him; but Marion shrank from that, not from false modesty, but she felt, with truth, that trust which could be so easily shaken was in no real sense worthy of her offering or of his acceptance.

The sound of the door bell broke the current of her thoughts, and the sight of Gould Whetmore touched her painfully. His face was grave, and there was a watchfulness about it which precluded true content; but, after all, it was the face of a man loved by the woman of his choice, and so lifted above complete unworthiness of joy. He stood unexpectedly erect, and those fine lines which complexity of character writes in the face

had been effaced by a feeling as simple as it was sincere. Before him Marion seemed like a bit of wreckage, tempest-tossed, yet for the moment he would see nothing but the unmistakable love which shone for him in her eyes. This she made no attempt to hide, but went to meet him with outstretched hands. He took them in his with a lover's eagerness, yet something in this sweet willingness smote him with a sense of dread, and he held them as one holds treasure not his own.

"Marion," he said, "you know what I think of my presumption in coming here at all; but if you love me—you do love me?"

"Oh, yes!" She spoke simply as of an already acknowledged fact, but the man's joy sprang to his eyes.

"Thank God!" he said, as he had said once before.

"Is that enough?" she asked sadly.

"Not if it is not for you," he answered. Puzzled and alarmed, he stopped to look into her face, and realized anew the havoc which the last few weeks had wrought.

The Whetmores were red-blooded men, but gentlemen above all. Now Gould called

every chivalrous instinct to his aid, yet in the end yielded to his feeling and took her unresisting in his arms, breathing over her those words of love and entreaty which he had been holding back, he himself did not know how long. Marion waited, passive, till his feeling had spent itself for the time. She trusted him, and indeed he respected her compliance, and even his strong clasp was one of protection rather than possession. At last he pulled himself together and led her to a chair by the fire. Bending over her, he said, with a touch of his old manner:

"I am a little lower than the angels, dearest," and as Marion did not speak, but smiled forgivingly: "For a man who began by begging you to repudiate his acquaintance, you must think me finely consistent; but I have no excuse to offer. Nature is stronger than I. I love you, Marion. What stands between us? Is it the past?"

Marion raised one delicate hand to shield her face from the blaze. "Not altogether," she said. "That should be past."

"I have never pretended that it has been faultless. It is that of the men of my race, and they are gentlemen." The emphasis

was deeply sarcastic, and into his face there sprang instantly the old lines. "But I believe there is some quality in me worthy of a better one. Your mother saw it, God bless her! and you, dear; but I think I ought to say to you that it was not so much my record of myself as Brookfield's opinion that I wished to shield you from. I am not worthy of you, God knows"—his face flushed deeply. "I was sorry before I met you, but it has been left for your love to punish me enough."

"I know," she said. "And it isn't altogether that. I should like to tell you. It is my impulse to show you all that is in my heart, but what stands between us seems so shadowy, and I want you to see how real it is to me."

She looked up at him earnestly, but she saw that he had heard her imperfectly. Something in her manner had recalled the supreme fact of her love for him, and he was wrapped in the thought of it, to the exclusion of any solution of the difficulty.

"Dearest!" he murmured, and, bending over her, he took her hands and covered them with kisses. Then, recovering himself, he said:

"Forgive me, dear; I know you are not mine."

Marion flushed warmly, and could not at once begin to speak, but Mr. Whetmore moved away, and, leaning against the mantel, gave her his full attention. After a minute she began:

"It seems strange that while my mother lived I never knew that I had no home. When she was gone"—Marion raised her hand to her throat, and her lover stirred uneasily, but did not leave his place—"I drifted about, and always thought of Brookfield. I love my people, even those I never saw, and my parents had lived here, and their friends were still alive. I wanted the country, too, and I thought my life had been too diffuse. I knew that village standards were narrow, but I had always thought of them as high."

She stopped and looked at Gould with a wan smile, which he returned grimly.

"Had you never heard of gossip in small towns?" he asked.

"Oh, yes!" Marion replied. "But the little I had heard seemed harmless enough. To tell the truth, it amused me."

"Yes," Mr. Whetmore said. "It's very

different looking at a cloud and living in one."

"That's just it," Marion said eagerly. "It's an atmosphere. It closes round me, and everything seems drenched in it. It reached me before I came here, and I feel as if it would pursue me after I am gone. To love and marry in it seems impossible."

She leaned forward earnestly, searching his face for comprehension of her thought.

That was clearly there, but he was dwelling upon the condition from which her thought sprang. To that he brought the painful concentration of a heart whose life was hanging in the balance. He asked himself—who could know better than he the crushing power of the accumulated littlenesses of this little life? Removed from them as he was by the breadth of a man's world, had they not steadily pushed him to the wall? How, then, should there be escape for Marion, whose delicate nervous organization had already been so rudely jarred? Yet Brookfield was not all the world, and their term in it need not be long. Out beyond was a larger life, in which it might be his privilege to make her happy. Could it be anything more

than a girl's sick fancy that this cloud could reach them there?

Spurred by such thoughts, he began to pace the floor. He would not have been himself if it had not strongly occurred to him to renounce her, less for her reasons than because her love, so freely owned, failed of the convincing power which belonged to it. It might be a phantom of her troubled Brookfield dream; yet if it was the reality to which she would one day wake, was it not laid upon him to save her from renunciation which would wreck her happiness as well as his? For a man of his character, no sharper dilemma could have been devised.

Moulded as he was by the life of his day, he had come to give to Marion's power of intuitive perception the reverence of the human for the divine. That the operations of this power were sometimes unintelligible was only another proof of its divinity, yet he may be pardoned if his confidence therein had been greater up to the time when he had ceased to verify them. He saw himself clearly enough in one respect; by this perception he was quite ready to be tried, to be rejected by it, by Marion. But to lose her

because of a state of nerves dependent on a bit of river mist or a tumble on the grass—all his manliness revolted from that thought.

It need scarcely be said that the bare possibility of such a fate stirred deeply those bitter waters which lay so perilously near the sweet springs of Gould Whetmore's life, and as he stopped opposite her she was startled by the expression of his face, so bitter was it, unrelieved by a gleam of kindly feeling in the eyes; only the mouth kept its pathetic sweetness.

"Marion," he said, "I cannot plead for my life. I could tell you a thousand times that I love you. I could die for you, live for you—the rest is with you."

"What do you wish to do?" he asked, after a minute, for Marion sat silent, her face covered by her hands.

There are times when we have nothing in our gift but the bare truth, but we do not always recognize our opportunity. Marion took instant advantage of hers.

"I wish to go away," she said sadly. She lowered her hands to look him frankly in the face. "You see what my love for you is worth."

"I see," he said bitterly, yet his face almost immediately softened.

Marion continued:

"But I think it gives you rights over my decision."

"They must be shadowy, indeed," he said, but, as Marion's face quivered, his mood changed. He once more bent over her, incoherent expressions of his love and words of endearment springing involuntarily to his lips.

Marion waited, flushing under his words, and when the pause came she said:

"What do you wish me to do?"

He answered without hesitation, but with effort:

"I wish you to go away," and, as Marion did not speak, but waited for more: "But I ask you not to burn your ships. Come back here in six months, and we will talk about my rights. God knows I want them, if they're mine."

Marion hesitated for a moment, it is so much easier to kill one's happiness at a blow; yet she had no real thought of refusing.

"I will do as you ask," she said simply.

Mr. Whetmore gave a sigh which was not

all of relief. Perhaps only his manhood saved him from swift reversal of his request; he turned resolutely away from thoughts of the past or future, and addressed himself to Marion's present needs.

"You are very tired," he said gently, "and it is my fault. Before I go, will you let me see you go upstairs to rest?"

Marion rose without a word, and moved beside him to the door. At the foot of the stairs she turned and gave him her hand; her eyes were full of tears.

"I have behaved miserably from first to last," she said. "I seem to have come here to spoil your life."

Mr. Whetmore's eyes lightened dangerously.

"I'm afraid I couldn't discuss that without offence; but I should like to say that, if I never see you again, I can thank God for these few months; and now, dear, will you go while I have strength to let you?"

CHAPTER XX.


MARION'S return to Brookfield was on an April day of a date just a week earlier than that on which she had first come to live in her house. It had been a forward spring, and she had pictured to herself with delight the first enchanting glimpses of it which the New England country would show, and for which the opulence of a southern March seemed to have been designed to prepare her.

Springtime in the city is at most only related to the same season in the country, but it has attractions of its own, and of these Marion had glimpses as she passed through New York. There had been a heavy shower in the early morning, but at nine o'clock the pavements were drying quickly under a warm spring sun, and each little pool held the reflection of wind-swept skies. The air was everywhere pierced by the shrill chatter of sparrows, and irrepressible bits of

greenery showed brightly against dull walls of stone.

The train entered the hill country under lowering skies, which soon began to let fall occasional uncertain flakes of snow. Presently the air was full of them, and a thin white coat was spread over everything, shutting out the promise of the spring. When Marion reached Brookfield the storm was hours old, and the world seemed wrapped in snow, for the flakes were not the tiny crystals of a winter storm, which drive straight to their goal, but big, wet blotches, which courtesied slowly to the ground, caught by every projection, and clinging damply to the windward side of anything.

It had been Marion's fancy to come unannounced, and this had seemed harmless enough in the early morning sunshine; but now she wished weakly for a welcome, and looked about vainly for a familiar face. Even the driver of the stage was a stranger. He touched his hat and took her bag, but Marion thought regretfully of his predecessor, who had lacked these graces, but whose hearty "Glad ter see yer back!" she had never lacked before.



At this moment she caught sight of Mr. Clapp, keeping guard over a pile of express boxes on the edge of the platform, and she hailed him with delight. The old gentleman turned quickly, and, hurrying over to her, warmly grasped her hand.

"Well, well, if this isn't Marion! I'm glad to see you, child."

"And I am glad to be here," Marion said, her mood quite changed. "But, Uncle, I shouldn't think this was very good weather for you."

"Well, it isn't," he admitted; "but since your aunt has been laid up——"

"Oh, yes! how is Aunt Susan?" Marion asked hastily.

"Well, she's pretty middling now," Mr. Clapp said. His face became suddenly grave, but there was a suspicious twinkle in his eye.

"I don't know as I ever saw rheumatism take hold of anyone the way it has of Susan," he said.

Marion smiled involuntarily, for no one could forget Mrs. Clapp's strictures on persons needlessly rheumatic; but here the driver called "Stage ready!" and she hast-

ened to take her seat; then the old coach lumbered away. She leaned back in it with a sigh of content. Brookfield was still Brookfield, but for the present it was home.

That night she slept soundly, and woke to find a broad band of sunlight on her bedroom floor. Hastily putting on her dressing gown, she went to the window for a sight of the snow. If she had dreaded being thrust back into winter, her fears were at once relieved, for this beautiful white world was the world of spring, not in spite of the snow, but with its very connivance. The melting blue of the sky, reflected in the full river, with its still pools of overflow, the warm sun, glancing on the bright wing of a passing bluebird, were hardly more suggestive than the soft whiteness of the dissolving snow, which seemed like some beautiful enchanted growth, so perfectly did it clothe the earth.

Marion dressed by snatches, returning again and again to the window, to memorize the picture as it passed, and at the last she saw Miss Dempster turning in from the road, her skirts gathered about her, making her cautious way along the unbroken path. Marion watched her eagerly, and as soon as

she was near enough she raised the sash and waved a welcoming hand.

"Come faster, Allie!" she called gaily; "I have a whole trunkful of dry things."

Alice smiled back at her, shaking her head, but picking her way a little more quickly.

Marion met her at the door, and drew her into the library, where a good fire was burning. "Dear Allie," she said, "I'm so glad to see you!" and Miss Dempster responded cordially.

Marion breakfasted in the library, and chatted with Alice over the tray. She passed lightly over her winter, to come to Brookfield, about which Alice had much to tell. Mrs. Clapp's illness, Florry Burnett's engagement, and many minor matters, passed in review. Marion listened with interest and amusement quite untinged with bitterness. For now she saw Brookfield as it was. But if she no longer cherished illusions in regard to it, perhaps, for the first time, she was prepared to like it on its merits. The life which had once animated this shell had gone elsewhere, but another had come to take its place. There might be something to interest one, even in a world of symbols.

Uncle 'Lias, Kitty, and Don, Walter Kincaid, yes, Alice herself, with others whose names have not entered these pages, and that one whose memory lay warm about her heart, were concerned with realities—Marion glowed at thought of them; the rest amused her.

"Tell me about Florry's engagement," she said.

Alice answered with some reserve:

"Uncle Robert and Aunt Sarah seem very much pleased. Nathaniel is very generally respected."

Marion recalled him perfectly—a shrewd-looking young man, with an air of fashion, necessarily a little belated to her city eyes.

"He is very successful in business, and has always conformed to Brookfield standards."

"I see," said Marion briefly; "and how are Don and Kitty?"

"Oh, very well!" Miss Dempster answered, with hardly temperate enthusiasm. "Don is quite steady, and Kitty seems much changed."

"Dear Kitty!" Marion exclaimed. "I hope you see, Alice, that I do not believe in

encouraging notorious evil livers, or reforming men at close quarters."

She spoke pleadingly, for she loved Alice and really longed for her good opinion.

Miss Dempster did not speak for a minute, but her hesitation was not quite what it seemed. She really wished to speak from her heart, but that was not a simple matter to one whose utterances usually came by way of the head.

"I have always been able to believe that your motives were good," she said slowly; "and I would not have you think that I do not appreciate the stand you take. I believe I have never encouraged idle gossip,"—this with pardonable pride,—“but living in its atmosphere has a tendency to make one think evil rather than good. I see that you have been right about Donald and Mr. Whetmore, but I do not know how it would be if your system were carried to its logical conclusion."

"I'm afraid it hasn't any," Marion said, smiling; "and it isn't a system, anyway. I simply felt that those two were good men, and I gave them a chance to prove it. I didn't condemn them on hearsay, and I let

the past bury its dead. After all, perhaps there was not so much to bury as even I had thought."

"No," Alice said honestly. A resolution had been forming in her mind, and now she put it into words:

"I heard something the other day which I think it is right that you should know."

Marion looked up, surprised.

"That woman had a lover—not Mr. Whetmore; some Northboro man. He began going there a few weeks after you came here to live. Harriet Armstrong told me; she knew Mrs. Farraday in Paris; and she says Mr. Whetmore was very kind to her, and anyone could see that she was in love with him, but there was no sign of anything more."

Miss Dempster paused, and looked up at Marion, whose face expressed more than one emotion.

"Thank you, Allie," she said; "it is good in you to tell me. I trusted him, but it is human to wish to know. I think you ought to know that I love him, and that there is happiness in it for me now. When I was here before it all seemed coloured by something in the air."

It was hard for Alice to respond openly to such a confidence, but she showed in her own way her pleasure in receiving it. She found it easier to recur to the old subject.

"I see that you were truly charitable, and it has all turned out well; and yet your experiment might have had disastrous results."

"I suppose you mean that I might have fallen in love with the wrong man," Marion said, blushing brightly. "But is any woman proof against such fate? I thought," she added, "that you suspected that Florry might have met it, and yet you tell me that Mr. Beardsley has always 'conformed.'"

Miss Dempster did not reply to this directly, but said somewhat irrelevantly:

"There seems to me to have been less gossip here this winter."

"Florry busy about her own affairs and Aunt Susan shut up—but rheumatism doesn't affect the speech," concluded Marion mischievously.

"No," Alice said, smiling reluctantly. "But she is not so spirited. She has felt the confinement; and, really, Marion, I think she has missed you."

"I don't doubt it," Marion said dryly; and for a moment there was an awkward pause.

In breaking it the talk fell into other channels, away from the purpose of this sketch.

The lovely day proved only a weather-breeder, and its evening closed in dark and stormy. Marion retreated early to the library, where were a good fire, her beloved books, and as many of her personal belongings as she had had time to gather about her. She felt restless and lonely, as she had on that evening a few months before, but with the difference of health and hope. She had no certain means of knowing that Gould Whetmore had heard of her arrival, but she felt that he had, and between every breath she listened for his step. It fell at last on the porch, heralded by the soft clash of sleigh bells, and Marion rose to meet him.

All winter she had waited for this day, yet often as we picture a coming event in our lives, its reality must still be different, and the man who stood in the doorway was not the one Marion had seen in dreams.

This one seemed indefinitely older, less by added lines and grayish hair than by some

subtle loss of force which marked a patience not of youth. Yet his face lighted expressively at sight of her, and well it might, for she had gained something besides health and a sound mind.

Her charm was less tentative and elusive, there was an amplitude about her which suggested maturity, with its breadth and vigour, and which made her not far from beautiful in this supreme moment of her life. The sight of her lover smote her with remorseful pain, yet only made her love him more; where, then, was that sweet freedom which had reassured him when she did not feel so sure? She stood with drooping head, struggling, unsuccessfully, with the feminine instinct to be caught flying, which no normal woman is without.

Mr. Whetmore crossed the floor toward her, and was the first to speak.

"How well you look," he said, in his full, rich tones; and he held her hand as if he could never let it go.

"Yes," Marion said with a fleeting look, "I must thank you for that."

"Oh, no!" he said sadly; "you forget that I would have kept you if I could."

"I was not thinking of that," Marion said, blushing.

She drew her hand away with gentle dignity, and stood facing him, pleading her womanhood in every line.

Mr. Whetmore grew suddenly pale, yet over him there swept a tide of youth, blotting out the added lines and making gray hairs a mockery.

"Marion," he said, in the deep, inward voice of suppressed passion, "I did you a great wrong; I ought to have let you go. God knows I love you ten times more than when you left me, but it is ten times better, too."

Marion breathed quickly and the blood beat in her ears. She did not speak, but those silent messengers which continually traverse the air between a woman and her beloved spoke for her, and, by their multitude, overcame Gould Whetmore's resolve.

"Marion," he said involuntarily, "do you love me? Do you wish to be my wife?"

"I came home for that," she said simply, and he took her in his arms.

Half an hour later they sat before the fire, in a rapture of content,

"I'm afraid I must ask you to live in Brookfield," he said.

"Oh, yes!" she answered; "I understood that."

"And the atmosphere?"

"We must lift our heads above the fog."

"Already mine touches the stars."

Marion smiled.

"The difference is that I shall be concerned with real things. To make you happy and your father comfortable, to take care of your home and all that; I shall have no time to chase my own shadow. After all, that was all I did, and yet I found fault with others for chasing theirs."


"There's a difference in shadows," Mr. Whetmore said. "Yours was worth chasing."

"Perhaps so," Marion said; and they returned to their rapture of content.

It is several years since Gould and Marion were married, and still they live in Brookfield, for his father's life has been unexpectedly prolonged. Devoted to his daughter-in-law, his appreciative senses take note of much that would seem to be without their range, and he likes her for being what he is

not. He has built her a house near his own, on a bold wooded bluff, overlooking the river. The situation is incomparable, and the architect has availed himself of it in a way to increase his fame, and to give to the Whetmores some undesired notoriety.

It will not surprise the reader to hear that this house has not affected Brookfield architecture; but, though the villagers deny its superiority, they are proud of its success, and lose no opportunity of making it contribute to the glory of Brookfield. It is somewhat after this manner that they have come to regard Gould and Marion. Brookfield is not dull, and it cannot help seeing that, whatever may be thought of them within the village limits, outside that circle they are held in high esteem. House parties are frequent at "Uplands." Its mistress loves the good old grace of hospitality, and it is part of her wifely cunning to remind her husband, in his exile, of his many friends. Well-known persons, some of whom are distinguished, are among her guests. Brookfield often runs to the front windows to see them pass, and prides itself unscrupulously on Marion's social standing. Aunt Susan, indeed, has



gone farther than this, but everyone agrees that she is very much broken.

It may very well be asked whether it has ever dawned on the inhabitants of the town that this success of Gould and Marion has been won on a larger field, and with weapons different from those with which they push each other about in the village arena; and to this question we answer, "Yes" and "No."

Brookfield, like the great country to which it belongs, is yet in its precocious childhood, and its appreciation of many things must be an imaginative one. It is worth while, however, to touch the imagination of a child, and among the townspeople there certainly are persons who find the old ways less satisfying than of old. Every year there is a larger town contingent at the gatherings on the hill, and that charity which thinketh no evil bids fair to become the fashion, among the younger people at the least.

It seems hardly necessary to say that the marriage is a happy one. There is so much that these two persons can take for granted, such common consent in their respect for personal liberty; and for the rest, those

complementary traits which make of their two natures an harmonious whole. This happiness, like everything earthly, is not without alloy; yet it is at all times a source of inspiration to their lives; and sometimes, by virtue of it, there echoes in their hearts that unspoken and unwritten Word whose meaning is the meaning of life, and the hope of whose utterance is the hope of immortality.

THE END.





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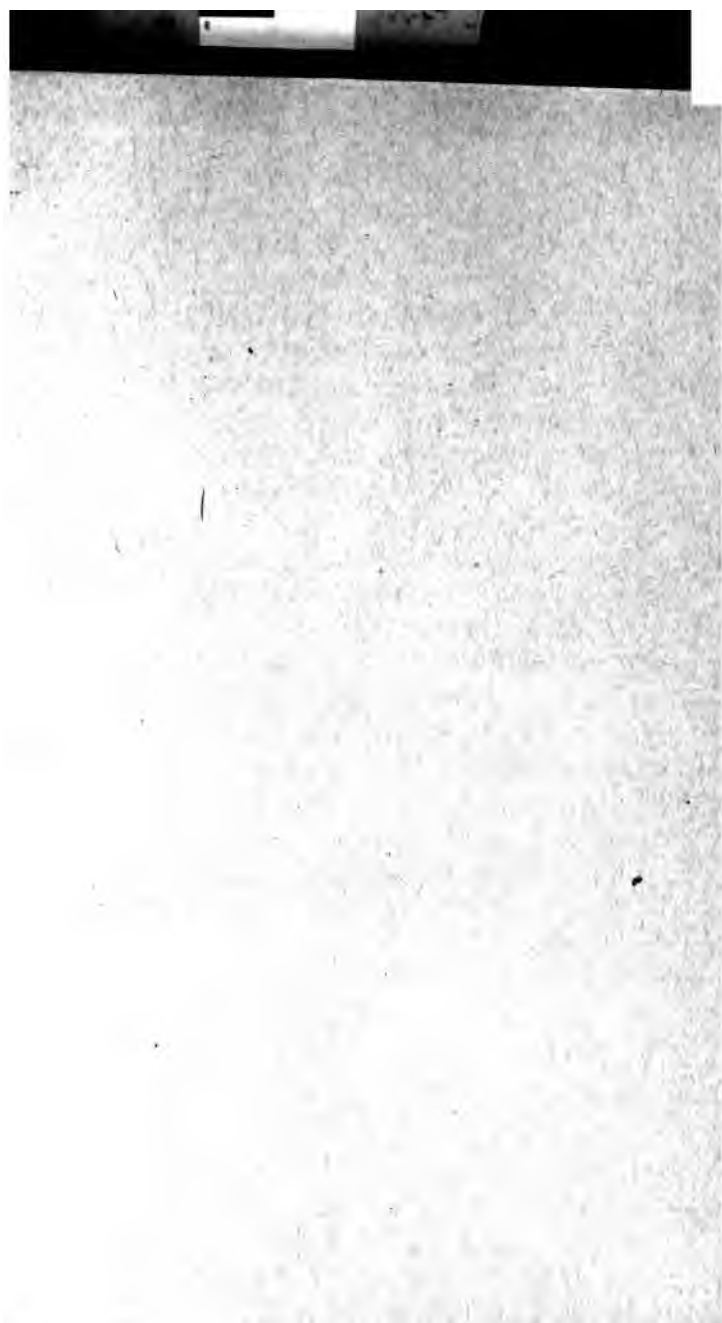
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